

Dormant Ability

BY: DAVID PAGE

My phone rang sometime between 8:30 and 9:00 AM on the Monday of Spring Break. I heard, “You awake, son?” It wasn’t my dad; it was my next door neighbor. I had made breakfast plans and, not surprisingly, I overslept. I mumbled that I would jump in the shower and be over in fifteen minutes.

I suppose having breakfast with a sixty-four year old man isn’t quite what everyone expects a medical student would be doing on Spring Break, but I wouldn’t have it any other way. Mr. Cliff Leonard has lived next door to my family since before I was born. Although we seem like an unlikely pair, we spend a good deal of time together every time I go back to Jacksonville.

Mr. Leonard received a new heart over a decade ago and we have grown close ever since. He recently described his distinct memory of returning home from the hospital. My entire family came over to visit. He said that we all had the same awkward response when we reached the end of the driveway. We did not know exactly what to do or say, well, everyone but me. Being the uninhibited kid that I was (and probably still am), I ran up to him and gave him a big hug. I almost knocked him over, not realizing the fragility of his condition at the time. As he was rehabilitating that summer we spent a lot of time watching the World Cup.

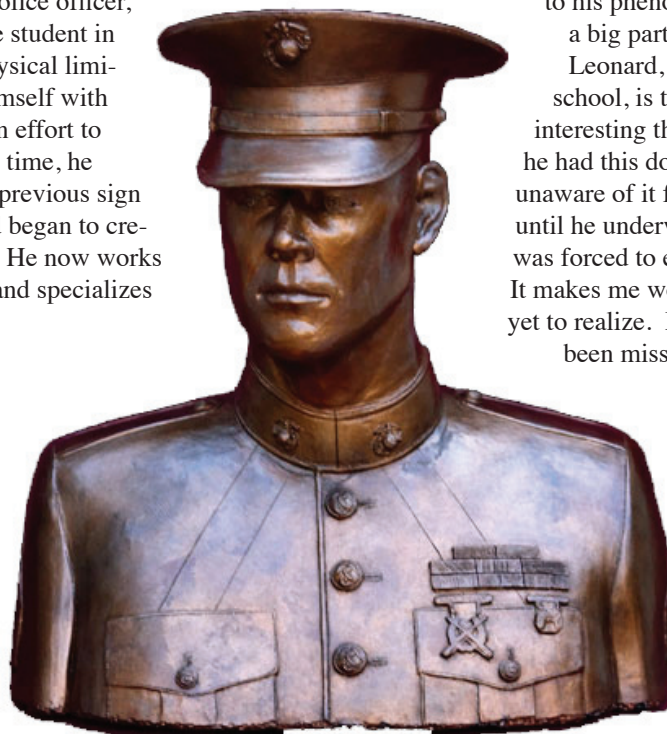
Prior to receiving his transplant, Mr. Leonard had been a marine, police officer, home remodeler, and graduate student in psychology. With his new physical limitations, Mr. Leonard found himself with a great deal of free time. In an effort to find something to do with this time, he tried his hand at art. With no previous sign of artistic ability, Mr. Leonard began to create some amazing sculptures. He now works almost exclusively with clay and specializes in busts.

Looking for a way to give back, Mr. Leonard began a particularly touching form of community service. He has fashioned a bust of every marine from Jacksonville who has fallen in service

to our country over the past few years. He has donated his work to either the family of the late soldier or the school that the soldier attended prior to deployment. The bronzed bust of a twenty-year-old Private First Class Nathan Clemons who died in Iraq on June 14, 2005 is now on display at his Alma Matter, Terry Parker High School in Jacksonville, Florida.

Mr. Leonard has done a bust of my three oldest nieces in addition to giving our family several other handmade gifts. One piece I find particularly amusing is the hand-carved wooden work named ‘Jaws’ that he gave to my father, an attorney, who is a ‘shark’ so to speak. Only recently have I become involved in his artwork. Over Christmas vacation, Mr. Leonard was working on a bust of a soldier who looked a bit like me. He asked that I come over to put on a marine jacket and hat to pose for this soldier’s likeness. I felt bizarrely honored to model for this young man who gave everything he had defending our country. Since that point, Mr. Leonard has asked me to come over and help him in his studio whenever I am in town. He says he likes to have an extra set of eyes on the work, but I think he just enjoys having a good friend around. I certainly don’t mind the free bagels and coffee.

My relationship with Mr. Leonard is one that I cherish and I have enjoyed seeing his phenomenal artwork. It has only been recently that I have begun to understand how much his artwork has helped in his recovery from having a heart transplant. Obviously, his artwork comes second to his phenomenal wife, but his art is clearly a big part of what keeps him going. Mrs. Leonard, the principal of a special needs school, is the epitome of a saint. The most interesting thing about Mr. Leonard is that he had this dormant ability. He was entirely unaware of it for four decades and it wasn’t until he underwent a life altering surgery that he was forced to explore himself and find this gift. It makes me wonder if I have talents that I have yet to realize. Maybe there is something I’ve been missing because I’ve been too busy or just plain dense.



More of Cliff Leonard’s artwork can be seen at: www.sculpturebycliffleonard.com