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### Calendar Shows Art of Injury Survivors

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This is the second year the **Brain Injury** Association of New Hampshire has published a fundraising calendar. It's also the second time a painting by local artist Donna Hoffmann was chosen for the calendar's cover. Last year, Hoffman's forest scene, titled "If You Really Look, Even the Darkest Forest has Light," was the top vote getter. This year, the artist's winning entry is a watercolor, "Morning Glories Only Bloom With the Morning Sun, but People Bloom anytime in the Light of Kindness."

Hoffmann is one of about 5,000 New Hampshire residents living with the effects of a traumatic **brain injury**. Like most survivors, she suffers from an ongoing host of medical conditions, including intractable depression that in her case has not responded to medication. She is a prolific artist, producing a continuing body of work despite the medical problems and complications that have plagued her and grown worse over the past year.

Hoffmann has high blood pressure that her doctors have not been able to control, a condition that is affecting her eyesight. She has also had serious adverse reactions to antidepressant medication and is so sensitive to medicine that an aspirin or dose of Tylenol could kill her. She documents her struggles in stunning images that run the gamut from whimsical to horrible, drawing inspiration from her husband, John, her adult son, her friends and her little dog, Lily.

She says her husband's steadfast love and loyalty have brought more relief than any medicines. But she is frustrated by the lack of understanding among people outside her family who, having no experience with **brain injury**, are sometimes thoughtless, making comments that cut to the quick.

"One problem with treatment in this case is that damaged **brain** tissue can respond differently to medications, sometimes in a negative way, or not at all," Hoffmann wrote in a note she prepared before meeting with The Telegraph. "So that when you see that ad on TV inferring that relief is 'just a pill away,' don't assume that as absolute."

Hoffmann, 55, is a retired registered nurse and Rivier College graduate. She graduated first in her high school class and was at the top of her nursing school class. But following her **brain injury** in 1991, she often felt incompetent. It took nine months of painting lessons, the teacher holding her hand to keep the brush from trembling, before Hoffmann could hold a paintbrush on her own.

She says anyone who hasn't suffered a **brain injury** or known a survivor can't imagine the drive, energy and **brain** power it takes to accomplish the most mundane of tasks. Basic housekeeping, for example, is a gargantuan effort, as is making preparations for leaving home to attend a class or run an errand.

"In my case, my doctors continually tell me there is 'no magic pill' for me," she wrote.

Painting was a childhood passion. But since her **brain injury**, depicting her feelings in images has been Hoffmann's salvation. She paints almost every day, using color, shape and light to express naked pain and reveal moments of hopefulness.

Her contribution to a statewide quilt representing each of the 5,000 people in the state living with a **brain injury** is a case in point: a self-portrait drawn in fire-reds depicts "the scream nobody hears," while flecks of glitter scattered across the figure's head and bodice reveal glimmers of hope.

The split-level home the artist shares with her husband, John Hoffmann III, a meteorologist

for the National Weather Service, is filled with Hoffmann's paintings, a gallery including the representational work she did before her **injury** and the expressionism that came afterward. There are two glittery angels wearing the artist's face decorating one wall and a stern-looking nun, also bearing a resemblance to the artist, in a frame above her worktable, ages Hoffmann says are visual cues to keep her thinking straight when her mood sinks. But Hoffmann does not restrict herself to releasing the tumble of feelings brought on by her **injury**. She is just as interested in painting the world outside, flowers, fish, turkeys, birds and other subjects she depicts with similar soulfulness.

"I don't paint anything unless it means something to me," the artist says.

Hoffmann regularly donates her artwork for raffles at her Jazzercise class and has made gifts of her work, always with no strings attached.

"I need to feel I have something to give, to make a contribution," she says.

She isn't the only one.

The **Brain Injury** Association of New Hampshire started the calendar project last year for two reasons: to give a venue to people with **brain injuries** who are making art; and to use proceeds from sales of the calendars to provide telephone support to new survivors.

"The best way to recover is to continue to work through those things. It's important to create an environment you had prior to **injury** and then work through the consequences of the **injury**," says Judy Sullivan of the BIANH. "To deal with the process is the big thing, and to work through the depression, the grief, the loss, to develop a new you."

That is more easily said than done.

But Hoffmann's tranquil stalk of morning glories is a powerful example.

"My husband shines for me every day and so do my friends at Jazzercise," Hoffman says.

"They keep my flower blooming when I think there's no sun left."

To purchase a calendar to support the **Brain Injury** Association of New Hampshire, call 1-800-773-8400. Calendars cost \$15 each, and buyers receive one free calendar for every five purchased. Proceeds from the sales support a telephone support service for new survivors.

For more information or to view other artwork in the calendar, go to [www.bianh.org](http://www.bianh.org).

**Illustration:** Courtesy photo

Donna Hoffmann created this square for a larger quilt dedicated to New Hampshire residents with **brain injuries**. She suffered an **injury** 10 years ago, and her square depicts her struggles since then.

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