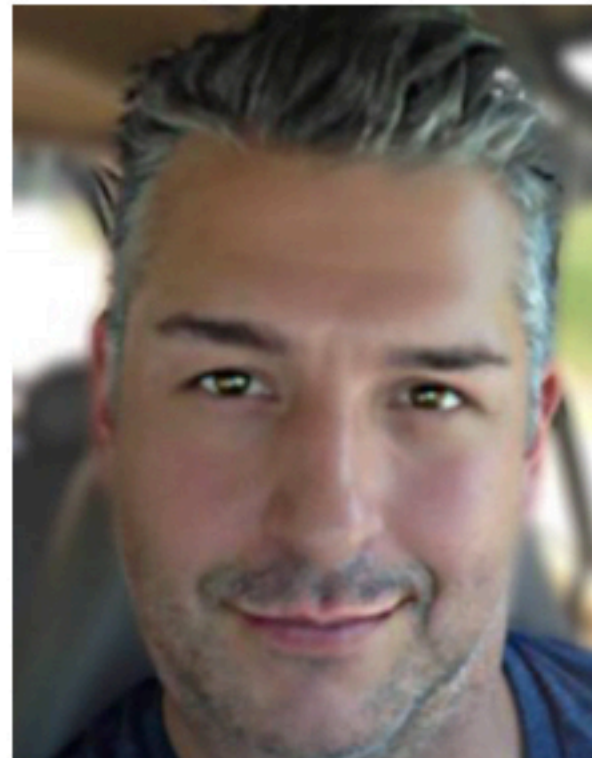


DOWNING IN THE DELTA

By: Clint Whitney Downing



I have been pondering how to introduce my first article for Delta Style. I was featured in this magazine in its first year of existence back in April of 1997. Since that time my life has gone through many transitions. When my friend and high school classmate, Niki Franks Dixon, joined the magazine, I asked to meet with her about some community projects I was involved with that would make for some great interest stories for the magazine that I felt were lacking. At that very given moment she said, "Well why don't you take these ideas and run with it? You can start with our next issue." I found this to be quite an honor after the journey that my life has taken in the past seven years. Like many others, my life went through its share of ups and downs that lead me to a crossroads of self-discovery. For those who know, this particular journey I experienced from addiction and depression that resulted in a life full of turmoil, irrational decisions and punishment. From this great process of recovery and redemption, I have found a greater purpose with the hope to inspire others.

Through God's helping hand, my amazing family, devoted friends and their great support and love, I was successful in battling the demons of my life and finding a pathway to peace. I chose to enlighten you on this part of my past life in order to establish my mission in writing this column for Delta Style.

After a long process of deciding what exactly I wanted to make this column about, I have decided that I want to be about all that inspires me. It may be a particular person or group of people whose selfless actions have made a memorable impact on me personally or the region in which we live. It may very well be places of interest or events that inspire me creatively, emotionally, collectively or figuratively.

We live in a great area enriched by many great influences. These unique individuals do what they do simply because it is what that feel is required for personal balance and harmony. They are unaware of the impact they can really have on those around them.

With November being a time of Thanksgiving, I could not think of a more perfect time to begin writing. Over the course of the past months I have written a series of posts for my Facebook page that have been not only a building block for my new life but also a way to inspire others with the hurts, habits and hang ups from their lives. These posts were created to share a more optimistic approach to life in this very imperfect world. It is from these post that I became more inspired to want to share on a more media driven arena with the hopes that a glimpse of what a wonderful world it is that we live within, even amongst all of the chaos and tragedy. From all things come great new ideas that can inspire us to make the needed changes required to make life even better. Whether it is by prayer, meditation, therapy, yoga, recovery programs, or divine intervention; finding peace at the end of the tunnel is possible even before the journey ends. It is actually just the beginning. Celebrate Recovery is a program that happened to be very instrumental in bringing me full circle to where I am and who I am today.

Often we become so ungrateful for the most simplistic things that life has to offer us. We become weighed down by so many burdens that we forget who we are and why we should be giving thanks for having the chance to experience life. Somewhere along the way we become stagnant and forget what living is truly about. Life is full of hardships and it is from them that we should be able to grow as people and harvest what we have learned in order to inspire others to live their best life possible. It is said that we reap what we sow. A negative attitude is unhealthy in sowing the seeds of love. The outcome is quite often tragic and harmful to ourselves and others. Now that the introduction has been made, I feel it is time to proceed and bring forth things that should inspire us all.

Thanksgiving is a time that is mostly associated with pilgrims and Indians or turkey and dressing. After a morning of the Macy's Parade and a huge dinner the many retreat for a nap while others head to the hunting camp. Others are plotting out their course of action in the great battle of Black Friday, which is begun to start on Thanksgiving evening. Amid all of the hustle and bustle of trying to score the best deals, people tend to lose out on the true meaning of giving and those who are thankful to receive. Some of the best gifts that one can be thankful for are enriched by embracing our heritage in the south. Just this past month of October, my friends Ashley Keever and Krista Keever Rhymes assisted in extending

such a gift. These two sisters, whom I often refer to as the bookends, have been a great duo of support to me on my journey since when met some 15 years ago. They have been through many of the chapters and been a constant of unconditional love and support. It is no different when it comes to them assisting in their community from their efforts with the Monroe Junior League or through sponsorships and donations to many nonprofits in our area. As owners of both, The Muffin Tin in Monroe and The Trenton House in West Monroe, they love to help make a difference when they can.

Recently they were approached by Doug Gitter of Gitter Gallery in New Orleans about making a contribution of 30 gleece pieces of folk art representing ten different folk artists; six of which are in the Smithsonian. Of these artist the most renown is Clementine Hunter. Each year around Thanksgiving, Doug likes to give back and for a moment in time the art inspires or makes a child happy. It will not only fulfill the artist mission but Doug's mission as well. After a bit of thinking, Ashley and Krista felt that the Louisiana Baptist Children's Home was the perfect place for these great works to be displayed in a permanent home. Upon contacting the children's home, plans were set forth for the presentation of this great collection representing great stories on canvas of life in the south were unveiled on October 9, 2014. Following the presentation Doug signed pieces in a reception at the Muffin Tin. The serving platters and bowls that took a 6 year process of designing without losing the integrity of the original works of art.

Gitter spent much of his time while studying law at Loyola University driving through the rural south meeting with self-taught artist and collecting their works. Many of them came from modest means with little if any education and were happy with their stations in life by creating the works of art they were simply expressing themselves and their emotions. Others would later claim them as works of art. Many had to



LBCH President Dr. Perry Hancock & Gitter Gallery Owner, Doug Gitter

Presentation of Clementine Hunter's collection to be displayed at Louisiana Children's Baptist Home.



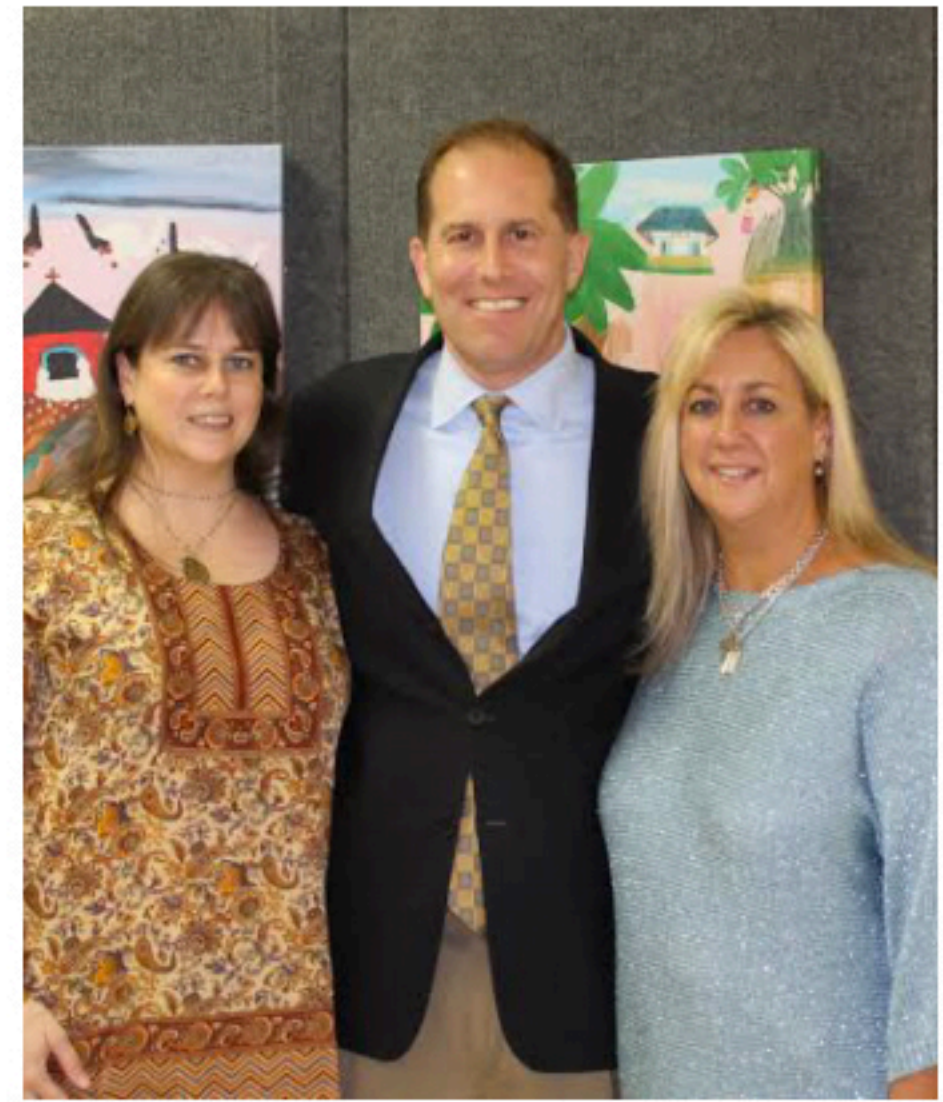
overcome great challenges but became great artists.

Louisiana's most famous artist, Clementine Hunter painted about what plantation life was like prior to mechanization in agriculture. She died in 1988 at the age of 101. So not only did she work cotton fields and pecan groves but, she watched a whole way of life change during her lifetime. She is the only American artist that recorded what that lifestyle was like. One of her more famous works, The Baptism at Cane River made it on the list of Oprah Winfrey's list of her 50 favorite things for 2013. This particular gleece is still available today.

It is through art telling a story of life in the past that we can truly appreciate the life we are all now afforded. These great stories of inspiration are now able to live on as wall accents or serving food at gatherings while sharing a piece of history and all that we are thankful for.

Inspiration comes in many ages and sizes. Such is true of this very unlikely pair. I had the opportunity to unite two families living on opposite sides of the Ouachita River. It was a heaven sent union of such. Both of these children have their own share of struggles.

Abby Lord, 8 year old daughter of Jennifer and Heath Lord, was diagnosed with an auditory processing disorder at the age of 4. Often mislabeled as autism or Asperger's syndrome, this disorder affects the way she process things differently from normal children. Extremely creative and civic minded like her parents, Abby chose not to let her condition keep her from wanting to give back and help others. Thankful for her siblings



Braylon Streetman, son of Justin Streetman & Brittany Bourg Streetman, suffers from Dandy-Walker Syndrome. He was the recipient of Abby's Idea.

Abby Lord, 8 year old daughter of Jennifer & Heath Lord with her lemonade stand.



Brooklyn 4, and Mae almost 2, Abby approached her parents about something they could do together as a family. She wanted to create a lemonade stand and raise money for other children with special conditions.

Taking it as just something she wanted to do to past the time, they allowed her to set it up on the weekends at the end of their driveway. Abby was far more serious than this and had a larger plan in mind. So out comes the power tools and a stack of wooden pallets and a portable lemonade stand was established. Fresh squeezed with lots of love by the little Lords, this little lemonade stand that could began to pop up on various neighborhood corners as well as The River Market several times during the summer. This mission took on the name Abby's Idea and a nonprofit was established.

This little stand made it biggest impact on the Fourth of July when it was featured along the parade route of the children's parade at Triangle Park on Pargoud Boulevard. It is on this day of Independence that two great things would happen. The television news media would cover Abby's Idea and she would meet the recipient of all of this hard work.

Having just recently turned 3 years old this fall, Abby met a then 2 year old, Braylon Streetman face to face for the first time. Braylon is the son of Justin Streetman and Brittany Bourg Streetman. Braylon suffers from a condition known as Dandy-Walker Syndrome, a congenital brain malformation involving the cerebellum, a portion of the brain that controls movement and motor skills.

From their first meeting, they were all smiles and the families connected beyond phone calls and emails. As the inspiration for this mission continues to evolve, a website www.abbysidea.org and a Facebook page has been established to help further this cause to continue to help Braylon and other children. As an added effort, local artist, Lissy Sanders Compton of Mr. P's Tees has created a T shirt that is available with all of the proceeds going to the Abby's Idea Foundation.

It is truly a blessing to be inspired daily by children through their visions and efforts to make this world a better place. As with one child's obstacle, another seems more prevalent in their eyes. It is through the gifts of giving and being thankful for what we have and who we are that we can learn from others regardless of age and continue to inspire others to make this a better place to be.

These wonderful acts of human kindness manifest as random acts of selflessness to great gifts of sharing artistic talents and taking time for others. In the coming months, I look forward to sharing great features as on those who continue to inspire us daily. As you go forth this Thanksgiving, take the time to be thankful for the life you have been given.

Clint Whitney Downing is a local designer and inspirational columnist that can be reached at clintdesigner@gmail.com.



Tablescape designed for DeltaStyle's cover shoot by Clint Whitney Downing. Clint also incorporated a beautiful array of horns and decor in the centerpiece, as well as a beautiful chandelier not seen here.

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