

## **Quite the Fish Tail By**

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It's amazing what you can do when you don't know you can't.

If you have ever struggled with a severe physical ailment or other health problem as bad as I have, read that over a few times and let it sink in. Why? Well lets just say in the eight years it took me to develop my fish replica wall art idea, I never thought it would give so much joy to customers like it has.

The whole reason I came up with the idea was for my own fun and personal use. That, and keeping my mind off my daily struggles by creating the trophy Brook Trout I never was able to catch when I was younger, strong and physically able. Today, I am considerably more weak; weaker than I ever anticipated back then, and so for now those chances are gone. So I thought, why not make my own Brook Trout trophy? Well it didn't just come to me as a simple thought like that, but looking back on it I think God played a role in this. It is just weird how it all came about. This was no overnight success, (more on that later.) It's weird how things happen, and can fall into place if you put yourself out there, let's just say that.

Back to the part of bringing joy and happiness to others. Emails, reviews and text messages from those that started buying my creations, (or I should say replica creations because in reality the actual fish are God's creations aren't they?), that I would start receiving after I started offering my replica wall art to others. Here are some emails from one customer that I want to share with you. You could say he is a fanatic of my replicas.

“Product is absolutely stunning. So real looking I have ordered 14 of these unique designs. Hats off to the owner, Brian. Your quality is second to none. Can't wait to see what he brings me next. Salt Water.”

Then later he sent me a text msg. and I quote “Hopefully I will be your customer of the year. I have a vision and you will have a big part in helping me achieve it. Your products are outstanding. God bless you and your family. Small world. Glad to make new friends.”

After exchanging a few words back in another text he wrote, “You are certainly a John Wayne American. Thank you for the kind words. Will talk soon.”

I thought to myself wow little did he know who he was talking to and what struggles I go through on a daily basis. For now I will call him the customer of the year and will circle back later in the chapter to let you know how I responded.

You see, my customer of the year had no clue about my life and my struggles with a genetic disease in short called FSH muscular dystrophy. Neither did a lot of other people when I was growing up, and that's the way I liked it, at least until now. I say until now because little did I know his reviews and msgs were the reason for me being rattled awake. Yes, I said rattled awake figuratively, and literally, at 4AM in the morning. I now have my wife, LeeAnna, and my customer of the year to thank for that. Now here I sit on my phone at 1AM rattling everything out of my mind a couple weeks later.

Back to my story: you see, when I was younger I always wanted to fly under the radar not ever wanting to tell people or discuss my disability. Why? Because in my mind it's a negative and people that know me know I'm a

positive, “glass half full” kind of guy. Actually, deep down when I was first diagnosed in the 4th grade, I never thought it would affect me the way it has. Back then, after I first found out, I thought to myself, this is never going to affect me that bad anyway. That's the way I've kept it in my mind my whole life, even though the opposite has happened. Maybe not bringing it up is my way of saying it's not going to affect me or maybe better put would be to say I am not going to let it affect me...well, at least not mentally. But physically there is no denying it. This genetic disease has been beating the crap out of me my whole life. While it may have affected my physical capabilities, I have maintained my mental fortitude allowing me to continue to find new things I love to do.

Back when I was first diagnosed in grade school, I could throw rocks as far as anyone else, run and jump up three flights of stairs without an issue (I would actually do this when I was younger and tell myself there is no way this is going to affect me physically, and I truly believed it.) Oh and let's not forget fishing; Stream fishing when I was younger, taking off every weekend and other times for a week with my boat and camping, to all kinds of places with friends and family in northern Minnesota and Canada. It wasn't without some struggles but I still enjoyed doing it either way. As time went on though the struggles got more real and eventually took all the fun out of it.

See that's what some physical disabilities do to you as they progress: they rob you of the fun times you have doing more physical things. Well if you are reading this and have been in a similar boat that I have you find something else that you enjoy to do and that's exactly what I did and continue to do today. A little insight for those that need it. You don't simply give up and fold your cards, you play them, you change the rules. Do you want to learn how to keep winning in this game? Even though some reading this may be worse off than me, you change the rules, you play a different game if you will, one that's fun that may be a little challenging in a different way but one that is fun. One that you can win!

As I got older and gradually weaker I sold my boat and went from camping to rented cabins and pontoon boats, to eventually just fishing once in a while on a little lake I live on. Fast forward to the present day and barely fishing at all. Remember though, like I just mentioned, you change the game and that's what I did again.

For those of you who may read this and think ‘his days can't be that difficult’ or, nothing tops your struggles., which may be true in some cases, but you still don't fold your cards. Remember you are the Captain of your own ship. You set the course for your own life and it is shaped by the decisions you make.

My life is far from perfect and far from being easy, I just choose to be positive about it.

So before I get back to the customer of the year and more about the story of how I started to create these fish, I thought I'd give you a little insight on my typical day. I mean, let me tell you, I have PCA'S (personal care attendants) that help me everyday on a daily basis. Without their help, I wouldn't be able to do anything. I need their help getting up in the morning, getting dressed, using the toilet and the opposite when going to bed at night. I need help taking showers and they even help wipe my nose when I have no place to prop up my arm. I used to be able to drive and that went from driving what I wanted to, to getting hand controls, then downgrading (in my opinion) to an accessible van and as time progressively made me weaker to not driving or owning a van at all. Ohh and lets not forget the daily Oxygen use and now bipap at night!

Am I always positive and always upbeat? No, let's be real. It's not always easy, like the time when I was still walking but was starting to struggle more; started to need more help and slowly transitioned into a scooter for more mobility: I was *not* happy. Going from doing everything myself to needing daily PCA's to help me with everything? I'll have to say 'wow! if I knew then what I know now,' or if anyone would have told me the challenges that lie ahead, maybe I would have done some things differently?

So why tell my story now? After talking to the customer of the year it all came together and I recognize the power of sharing my daily struggles and triumphs. By doing so, I hope to inspire others with similar challenges. I am on a mission to help others navigate challenges like myself; others that may struggle more than me.

So it is not always easy, I press on, and look at the things I can do, not that I can't do. I find things to do that would make life interesting. Do something that will get you excited to get out of bed every day and get going on your next project or whatever it is you enjoy doing. Which brings me back to how I went from fishing to creating fish art.

For over 20 years I owned a commercial printing, desktop publishing and design company with my cousin Dean. I learned a lot in that field. Anytime I saw something printed, I would look at it, check it out; I wanted to see how it was printed. Paper, style type, etcetera.

Reminds me of my grandfather who was a baker. If he went out to eat somewhere, and if they served fresh bread, he would be nose-deep smelling the freshness of it. He could tell right away, when walking into a restaurant, if they had rancid grease. You may wonder, *what does that have to do with anything?* That's the way I think, too...always looking for new ways to do things, to be creative. I guess I get that from my dad. He's always coming up with something new. You just never know when inspiration will strike. In fact, it was a trip the way this whole 'fish-y business' got started...literally.

Back in 2015, I took a trip to New Orleans. It wasn't just any old trip, but a trip to get out of the house and do something different for a couple of weeks. My cousin, Steve, and his wife, Tara, called me up out of the blue one day and said they wanted to stop by for dinner to discuss something. Little did I know they were planning a trip and wanted to take me with them. Steve had been diagnosed with cancer. He had been fighting it for a while, and found out first hand what it was like not being able to go out and do things when you want to. Naturally, they thought of me, and thought it would be a good trip for us all: Spring in the Florida Keys.

They decided to go check it out ahead of time, but found out it really wasn't all that accessible. The whole trip was almost called-off. After discussing it with my parents, who were itching to go on a trip themselves, we all got our heads together and decided to drive to New Orleans. It was just after St Patrick's Day, with nice weather and much to see, including a lot of custom art. While going through a few of the art fairs and flea markets, I noticed a lot of artists were creating things using a similar medium. As I mentioned earlier, I always like to check out new and uniquely-printed pieces. I was so curious how this was being done. I thought to myself, 'Wow I could make some really cool fish art by doing something like this.' I wasn't just a thought, though: it became something I just *had* to do. It was like something was bugging me and I was going to figure out a way to get some made professionally. I wish my cousin Steve could be here to witness what came from the trip but unfortunately he passed away from his battle with cancer a year later.

Over the next couple of years, I researched many topics trying to figure out exactly how I could make my own custom realistic fish art. I had already been designing pieces for CNC Plasma and Laser Cutters, but there were a number of things that needed to be done correctly in order to have something professionally done. After doing my research and tinkering around in my spare time for a couple of years (I was in no rush) I had a couple of pieces made that did not turn out too bad for the first ones. Still, I knew they could be better.

A long time local business owner and printing customer of ours back in the day, Nathan, generously offered his equipment and one of his employees to help me out on my initial prototypes. Even so, I knew that in order to start making more how I wanted, I needed more equipment. Plus, I needed to find out where I could get more pieces like this done from a manufacturer in the field.

Believe it or not, the place I found to start making the fish creations, in the way I wanted, came to me in the most unorthodox way out of the clear blue sky. It was dropped into my lap in the most uncanny way imaginable. As I mentioned I had been creating CNC plasma and laser designs. I was selling the designs on eBay for others to build and one day, not having done much with the fish for a while, I got an order from an individual on eBay. The files I sold were digital files to create a fire pit and can just be emailed. So I texted the buyer and noticed they were located in Minnesota. So my next usual question I ask them is what do they make. Then the customer (Arnold) texted back his business name with a website called Next Innovations. Of course I immediately looked it up as I was curious what they do and I couldn't believe it but they had the facilities to do exactly what I was looking for! I thought, hmm what are the odds that not only can they help me with my idea but they were also located in my state just three hours away? Arnold invited me up for a tour and called me a couple hours later. My quest for a mfg was over just like that, handed to me on a silver platter from the Lord above there is no doubt.

That brings me back to the customer of the year. Remember how I said I like to fly under the radar? Well after receiving his messages mentioned earlier, I figured, why not send him a link to a local news segment done on a show called "Uplift"? I thought he would enjoy it, but his response back to me after he had watched it was overwhelming.

What started out as something fun, making myself a trophy Brook Trout for the heck of it, has become more than just that. I never expected to get such a positive response, it just happened. Who knew there would be a demand for the fish art I had envisioned? I'll tell you who knew...

Looking back on everything now, it is amazing how everything just slowly fell into place. That's why I believe God had his hands all over this.

Despite your struggles you too are his miracle. Learn to move out of your comfort zone and stay actively engaged in life exploring new ideas. In doing so you may discover unforeseen avenues open up before you.

**Brian Luoma** is on a mission to motivate and inspire people who are disengaged or feeling unfulfilled in life. His goal is to encourage others and recognize their potential and that they can still have a positive impact on their life, loved ones and community. Brian's triumph over his life long battle with F.S.H. Muscular Dystrophy highlights the role of faith as a source of strength and resilience in navigating life's challenges. He further

believes Faith is a powerful force in providing encouragement and hope needed to overcome their adversities.  
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