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## **A search for herself**

### **Car accident can't shake artist's desire to find happiness and share it with others**

By Christian Czerwinski

NOISE

Sophia Kinne looks for beauty in everything she does, everywhere she goes.

She's figured out something special.

Sophia lives in a world trained to judge her, to analyze her decisions and decide she might not be able to live up to their standard. When she talks about her art or just seeing people on a bus, the 27-year-old lights up; her eyes glow and her lips pucker out just a bit from her face. Her happy spirit is contagious but she doesn't realize it.

But if May 8, 1996, never happened, Sophia might have been a different person. Today, she's still recovering from a car accident at 15 that left her with brain damage. When she was in ninth grade and on her way to the store with her sister, her car was hit from the side. She never saw it coming.

Three weeks later, Sophia woke up in a Saginaw hospital with injuries similar to that of shaken baby syndrome. She couldn't speak and struggled to move.

"I was so happy when I woke up to see my family looking at me," she said from her apartment in a transitional living facility in Lansing. "I thought I really did die."

She reflects on the accident with an innocent twinkle in her eyes. She's gone past the inner scars and found the meaning she says God had for her.

Sophia looks like any fit young woman on the street – blond hair pulled back, athletic arms and sparkly eyes. Her hair obscures the dime-sized scar on her head that was once the spot where doctors drained out her brain fluid. She's open about the accident and says her classmates didn't make fun of her when she came back in the

10th grade with slower speech and reflexes. She was even named homecoming queen during her senior year.

It's her speech that gives away her secret. It's still slowed, and she'll often pause when she talks because it takes her longer to process the information.

### **Struggles before success**

A few years after the accident, Sophia started drinking. Vodka. Beer. Jack Daniels. It was all done to kill the pain, and bring some sort of twisted joy to the loneliness of living in a world that she felt couldn't understand her. She lived in an apartment in Saginaw and took seven years to get her nursing degree.

Her father Shawn Kinne said she could only take a few classes at a time, but she did very well.

"There was a time when she wanted to be a physical therapist assistant, but they just didn't think she could portray enough confidence," he said. "I'm surprised that cognitively, she can do the things she can, it just takes her a little extra."

Sophia's smile – one that's impossible not to return when you talk with her – turns when she talks about her grandmother, whom she cared for while attending college. Her grandmother was her best friend. She still remembers her favorite words to her: "You are my best friend and like a sister to me. You're the only baby I've ever have."

Sophia's grandmother died, but she got through it. She had her last drink on March 16, 2007, and moved to Lansing about six months ago.

Now, instead of drinking, she listens to Bob Marley and paints fabric she's fastened on wooden boxes. She puts lights in the middle and creates vibrant and eclectic lamps.

Her work caught the attention of Absolute Gallery owner Kathy Holcomb, who thought Sophia's work was unique and currently displays it in her gallery.

"I think it's really cool. I decided to have it because I thought it was different, affordable and people would like it. Each one has personality and the way she names them indicates what the personality is," Holcomb said.

### **Living For Today**

At the transitional living facility, Sophia lives in a tiny apartment with a beautiful view of the woods outside. Ask her if she has any friends, and she'll say no, but without skipping a beat, she'll say she's happy.

"Everything is a lesson," she says. "Whether it's good or bad, you learn something for the future."

She says she wants to find as much beauty in the world as she can and make others feel good.

This, even though she knows no one will hire her as a certified nursing assistant, despite her qualifications and that Michigan is facing a nursing shortage.

To make ends meet, Sophia lives off insurance money and cleans an elderly couple's house. Her father keeps a close watch on her from Saginaw, sometimes calling three times a day.

"There was a time when we were worried if she was going to survive or not," Shawn said. "She didn't look good for the first few weeks."

But today's positive attitude hasn't come without a price. She almost gave up before. She can't count the nights she passed out from drinking and even considered ending her life.

Now, only thoughts of continued healing and becoming a full-time nurse consume her thoughts. Today, she finds pleasures in simple things like coffee, riding the bus or talking to her dad. You leave her presence feeling angry at yourself for ever being prickly, rude or selfish because she's found so much joy in a life where so much has been taken from her.

Every day she gets up at 6:30 a.m., paints her lamps, takes a shower and goes for a long walk.

She doesn't live in isolation. Brain damage hasn't stolen her smile. And loneliness hasn't coated her heart with bitterness.

Everyday, Sophia wakes up and greets the world with a smile. "I feel wonderful. I never seen life like I do," she says. "I don't get worried about things I can't control."

Sophia has figured out something special.

### **Find her art**

You can see Sophia's work at Absolute Gallery, 307 E. Grand River Ave., 482-8845