

## LIVING

## Survivors' talents ablaze on Touched by Fire

To most outward appearances, they were functioning: going to school, doing their jobs.

Inside, they were falling apart. Students, executives, doctors, parents. Depression, loss of joy, the out-of-control highs and lows of bipolar disorder, lack of faith in themselves — all symptoms of the struggles they were so afraid to let anyone see.

They figured they were losers and became more and more anxious, more and more isolated.

Locked in their secret worlds, they knew only too well the stigma attached to mental illness: the funny looks, the overly cheery pep talks. "Why don't you just get over it? Get a grip?"

Many attempted suicide. Some succeeded. Some got help and now reach out to others, telling them there is hope.

"I had a horrendously sadistic, relentlessly self-punishing self-image," says Dr. Michael Pare, a physician who today treats patients dealing with clinical depression and other emotional disorders.

"To say I hated aspects of myself is a huge understatement. I had an enormously exaggerated sense of my own social, academic, intellectual and physical imperfections.



HELEN HENDERSON  
*Direct Access*

"It wasn't so much that living was painful; it's more correct to say that living was pure pain."

Pare was among those who attempted suicide. He survived.

"I dragged myself up over many years," he says.

Rebecca Burghardt was not so lucky.

A student accepted to study at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Burghardt lost her battle with bipolar disorder four years ago when she ended her life.

In her memory, her family helped endow Touched By Fire, an online gallery, dedicated to artists battling mental illness. It exhibits more than 350 works in many genres, including drawing, painting, photography and digital art.

Pare, who admits to a predilection for surrealism, is among the roster of artists represented by Touched By Fire. He also is among those whose works will be on display



*Paranoia in Suits and Ties*, a painting by Dr. Michael Pare, is part of Touched by Fire online gallery.

Nov. 26 at the Royal Ontario Museum as part of a gala evening show and sale supporting artists on the website.

"You have to force yourself to find a new path," says Ann Vickery, a former athlete and marketing executive, who threw herself into her work in an unsuccessful attempt to ward off her growing anxiety and depression, manifested by "inappropriate" bouts of crying and guilt.

"I was in denial," says Vickery, whose joyful painting *Blooms* is part of Touched By Fire's online gallery. "My family could see I was

isolating myself . . . I built up so much guilt. I was so self-destructive. I had to learn to forgive myself."

Vickery had never picked up a paint brush until two years ago, when she did so after months of therapy at Markham Stouffville Hospital.

Today, she is a successful life coach and artist. Among other things, she has been commissioned to create a painting for a 2010 triathlon to raise money for research to fight breast cancer.

"I believe that in order to live fully, one must dare to take leaps of

faith with no expectations and no boundaries," she says as part of her statement on Touched By Fire.

Art "shows me beauty in so many different ways," is how Diana Portokalidis puts it. "It whispers for me to slow down and look. It has become a great therapeutic outlet."

For more information on the gala show and sale, or to see works by all the artists represented by Touched By Fire, visit:

[www.touchedbyfire.ca](http://www.touchedbyfire.ca)

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