

Nonnewaug High School Senior Wins National Gold Medal in Scholastic Art & Writing Competition

May 26, 2023 – Ten months ago, Nonnewaug High School senior Madison Dannenhoffer was not dreaming about a star-studded gala at Carnegie Hall for an art award. She was in a wheelchair and determined to walk again after suffering two broken legs in car accident.



As she began to heal physically, she dove into her passion for art as a way to help with the mental healing. Her accident was the subject of her senior Art Portfolio and the amazing pieces that describe how she was feeling have earned her top spots in several coveted art competitions this year.

Dannenhoffer was named a National Gold Medalist in the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards for “Parked.” The piece is a charcoal on paper rendering of her wheelchair in her parking spot at Nonnewaug beside classmates’ cars as a way to show how she felt - confined to her wheelchair, frustrated, immobile, and “parked.” Because of this poignant piece, she will attend the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards gala at Carnegie Hall in New York City on June 8 with the other national student winners and their art teachers.

“My art portfolio definitely helped me put a lot of thoughts about the accident on paper,” Dannenhoffer said. “I was not good at articulating my feelings about it with words. Art on paper helped me get them out.”

In August, Dannenhoffer, a two-sport athlete, was in a serious car accident that left her wheelchair-bound for several weeks, and on crutches for months after that. She spent the next several months taking it a day at a time learning to walk again and dealing with the post-traumatic stress of the accident. The wheelchair that she used to get around the halls of Nonnewaug and everywhere else became one inspiration for one of her drawings in her senior Art portfolio. She used it as a cathartic and creative way to get through the accident and the many losses that came with it including her senior year of field hockey and possibly the entire season of basketball.

She not only persevered, leaving the wheelchair behind, and playing the second half of basketball season, but her portfolio and the various pieces depicting her feelings and stages of recovery have earned her numerous art awards. And while she was extremely happy and surprised by the accolades for her art, Dannenhoffer will be the first to admit that it was not easy.

“Using my art was so helpful for me in my healing, but it has been bittersweet,” she said. “Visually, sometimes I had to pull back from it all. It was hard but in the long run I think it’s helped me.”

Art teacher Leeza Desjardins said she has seen many students use a personal experience as the subject of their senior art portfolio and added that Dannenhoffer’s decision to use her accident was both a healing and scary experience. “I could see her emotions during class as she worked on these pieces,” Desjardins said. “There were many times that she needed to walk away from what she was drawing. But I think that her using this has helped her mentally and physically heal from a very traumatic event in her life.”

“Parked” was done in the fall, just two months from the crash. “It was still so fresh for her,” Desjardins said. “And she really didn’t like the way it came out. But it was chosen as one of the best pieces in the nation. It is so powerful.”

“Parked” received a Gold Key, Best in Drawing for Connecticut, and a national gold medal, and was part of her Honorable Mention portfolio.

Dannenhoffer said she is excited to attend the gala in New York City with her family in June. She will also continue with art therapy that has helped her articulate her feelings about her accident through her drawings.