

Heart of a Tiger: Mason Cloud's Victory Vessel

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By Tisa Mason

HAYS, Kan. - When Mason Cloud's best friend in high school decided to attend the University of Kansas, Mason thought he might as well join his friend there. Mason was thinking about majoring in psychology, but when he toured the KU campus, he found it too spread out, just too big for his liking. His high school art teacher encouraged him to pursue his real passion, ceramics, and to check out FHSU's program. Mason remembers thinking that no college located way out in western Kansas would be worth considering, but based on his teacher's recommendation, he decided to visit.

When he got to campus, he was blown away.

"It was the most beautiful college campus I had ever seen," Mason said. Soon after arriving, he took a faculty-led walking tour of campus. At the end of the tour, Mason recalls asking his faculty tour guide who would be his professor if he chose to study ceramics. She replied that she would be his teacher. His tour guide that day, and his mentor to this day, was renowned ceramics professor Linda Ganstrom.

Fast forward four years and a soon-to-graduate artist Mason Cloud is presenting his art as a participant in the annual John Heinrichs Scholarly and Creative Activity Day, or SACAD for short. SACAD celebrates of scholarly, research, and creative activity at FHSU. The epicenter of the event is the Memorial Union Ballroom, the largest space on the second floor. This year, close to 100 scholarly and research posters were shared by students, faculty, and staff. Just down the hall from the ballroom is the Black and Gold Room, the hub for the presentation of creative work at this year's SACAD.

In the back corner of the room filled with paintings, drawings, and sculptures, Mason Cloud presented one of the more intricate pieces of ceramics at SACAD this year. The piece, titled "Victory Vessel," is a tall vase-like creation that features elegant arms that you might find on a sports trophy, heavy chains that extend from top to bottom of the piece, and a topper of small saucers and cylinders that look like barnacles.

The piece looks like it is made from a combination of copper and rusty iron, but the satiny metallic finishes are the result of a high-temperature glazing process that involves sodium carbonate, otherwise known as soda ash. When subjected to the intense heat, the ash turns to glass, giving the glaze a mottled and sleek finish. Mason said that if he knew how much a detailed understanding of chemistry would be a part of working in ceramics, he would have paid more attention in high school chemistry class.

This piece is special to Mason Cloud. It commemorates his victory over more than a decade of mental health challenges. It also represents how art can be a catalyst for healing. He will graduate this month with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree, and Mason wants to become an art therapist and put his talents as an artist and the lessons he has learned from his journey to mental health to work helping others. According to Psychology Today magazine, art therapy involves using creative techniques such as drawing, painting, collage, coloring, or sculpting to help people express themselves artistically and examine the psychological and emotional undertones of their art.

Mason is a firm believer in the value of mental health counseling from personal and family experience.

“I was never suicidal, but I had this constant sense of anxiety and doubt. I didn’t know what I wanted to do with myself, and at times it was just overwhelming,” Mason said. He found solace in the artistic expression of ceramics and from long skateboard tours around campus in the wee hours of the morning. From this form of self-help, Mason eventually started to think less about what drove his negative feelings and persistent anxiety. He began to appreciate that his life was actually pretty good.

“I had great friends, and life with my family had never been better. After struggling for years, I finally began open up about things that I had closed off previously,” Mason said. Halfway through his junior year, Mason’s proactive self-help approach of using artistic expression and long and isolated tours of campus helped him reduce his pervasive sense of doubt and anxiety. It also opened the door to seeking the counseling help he still needed.

Mason’s mom recommended a therapist in Wichita, and he calls the experience transformative. He is the son of two practicing therapists, so he has seen first-hand the impact a compassionate therapist can make on their clients’ lives. He believes his knowledge about the practice and his readiness to fully engage with his therapist made the difference. “I went into each session ready to open up about the challenges I was facing and with a clear idea of the questions I wanted to explore,” Mason said.

Mason is a firm believer in what is known as the “systems model” of mental health therapy. This approach is often used by family and marriage counselors, where individual mental health is viewed as a byproduct of the often-complex family and interpersonal systems that are part of everyone’s lives. The systems approach has worked well for Mason and his parents, and in a couple of years, he plans to join his mom and dad in the noble work of helping people break through the debilitating bonds of mental illness.

How exactly will Mason employ his remarkable artistry in his future work as a marriage and family therapist? That is yet to be seen, but he sees great promise in helping others create their own victory vessel, their own expression of their emotions and experiences through artistic expression. If I had to guess today, I’d say Mason’s clinical approach as a therapist will likely involve an element or expression of the artistry he has developed as a student at FHSU.