

# As a Disabled Artist, I Paint With My Feet to Inspire Kids to Embrace Their Differences

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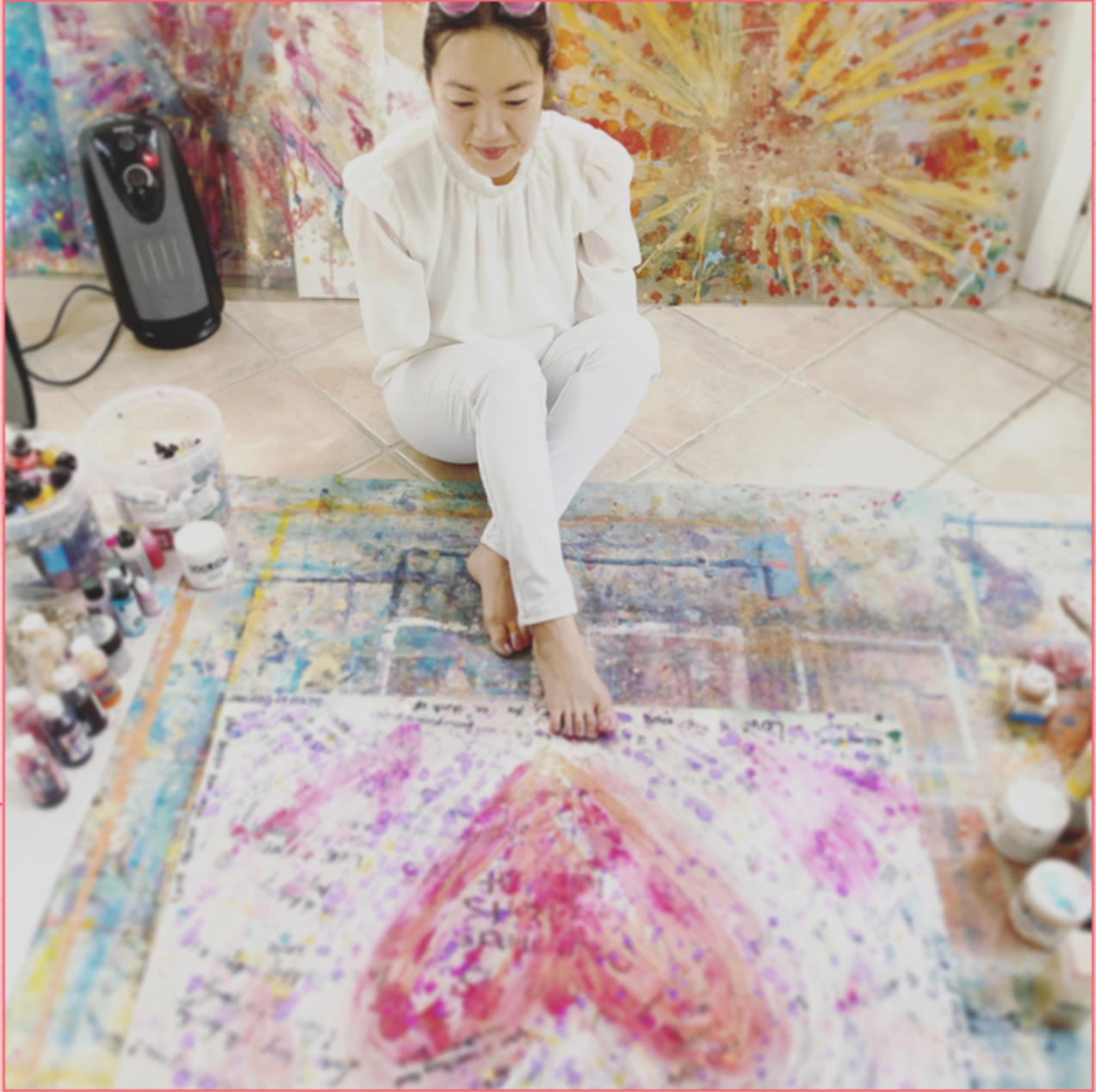
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Born without forearms, Rosie Jon creates art using her feet — and helps kids deal with bullying, self-esteem and more in the process.



By Amy Paturel

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Courtesy of Rosie Jon

Before Rosie Jon was born, her mom had a vivid dream that her future daughter had a special gift. When Rosie was born without forearms, that dream set the stage for how Rosie would approach life with a disability.

The daughter of an academic and an artist, and the oldest of four siblings, Rosie spent her childhood hopping the globe for her father's job and filling up empty sketchbooks with artistic creations. "My parents instilled in me a belief that nothing could stop me from achieving big things," says Rosie. Doctors never uncovered the reason behind her differences, but Rosie and her family didn't focus on that. "Instead of questioning why I was born without arms, I have always embraced the fact that I'm unique and do things a little differently," she says.

Rosie initially used her forearms to paint and draw. But at age 2, she started to grasp a crayon with her toes to create art. By 6, she was winning school art competitions. And throughout her childhood, she had a confidence that eludes many kids. "I knew I was more than what people expected me to be," she says.

Rosie began wearing prosthetic arms before she started preschool. As she grew older, putting on her arms became part of her morning routine, like her school uniform. Plus, she needed prosthetics to participate in sports. But for Rosie, prosthetics were hot, heavy and uncomfortable. And when she began practicing for her qualifying exams for university in England (like the SAT exams in the U.S.), she realized that writing essay-length answers for three hours in the London heat would be physically taxing. So she abandoned them indefinitely.



Courtesy of Rosie Jon

"The first few days without my prosthetic arms felt like going to school naked; everyone could see how my limbs really looked," Rosie says. "But I knew that gripping the pencil between my elbow joints would give me the control I needed to write faster and better than I could with the prosthetics." Her plan worked and she aced the exams.

## Overcoming others' assumptions

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Rosie encountered her first experience with discrimination when she applied to college to pursue a degree in mathematics and computer science. She loved art, but fell in love with computer graphics during the Disney and Pixar boom in the late '90s. "I completed the interview process at Oxford University with the other applicants, but after the math exam and six interviews, the admissions tutor called me to her office and shared her concern that my disability would become an issue at the institution," Rosie says. "That's when I started to question whether I could really achieve my dreams."

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Despite the weight of the Oxford rejection on her shoulders, Rosie applied to Imperial College of London. Administrators were so impressed with her on-site interview, they asked Rosie what sort of accommodations they could make for her even before sending her a formal acceptance letter. She met her husband, Ade, when he helped her open the door to her dorm building during her first week there. After graduation, she landed a job in animation at Pinewood Studios in London.

When Ade's career in information technology finance took the couple to Connecticut in the summer of 2008, Rosie was pregnant with their first child, Oscar. By the time Oscar was ready for kindergarten, Rosie also had a toddler at home, Leo. Her third child, Zara, would arrive two years later. What she found most challenging about parenting wasn't navigating feedings, changing diapers or grocery shopping. Now that she had children, her fears of discrimination resurfaced, worrying that judgement from children and parents about her disability would affect her kids.

"I saw the children staring at me at the bus stop. Putting my child on that school bus felt like sending him to a dungeon of lions ready to attack him because his mother had no arms," she says. As Rosie said goodbye to Oscar while he boarded the school bus, she resolved to find a way to connect with the children in Oscar's newly formed social circle.

## Stepping into her own

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Rosie didn't set out to use art to inspire others, but an opportunity came to her anyway. In 2013, a friend had invited Rosie to a three-day women's retreat hosted by the "We Want More Ministry," a Christian-based organization that invites women to explore their God-given purpose through demonstrations of mindfulness and artistry. An artist who had been scheduled to present was unavailable, so Rosie agreed to step in and cover for her.

| I felt God saying, 'I want you to be my paintbrush.'

The women sat in a semi-circle before Rosie as she balanced on one foot and applied paint with the other. She was so nervous, she kept her eyes fixed on the canvas for the entire 90-minute session. "That was the first time I painted in front of an audience," says Rosie. "I didn't know what to do or how to do it, but I felt God saying, 'I want you to be my paintbrush.'"

When Rosie completed the piece, she looked up from her artwork and saw women in tears. "They told me watching me paint encouraged them to overcome their own limitations," Rosie says. "I realized I had a gift I could share with the world and a story that had purpose."

## **Empowering children through art**

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Rosie realized sharing her artwork with Oscar's classmates could have a similar impact. And when she brought up the idea to Oscar's kindergarten teacher, Jessica Olson, she agreed. On the day of the event, Rosie introduced herself stating the obvious.

"I'm Rosie. As you can see, I was born without arms, but I had a choice: I could let my physical disability limit me, or I could be more than anyone expected me to be. I could be extraordinary rather than ordinary." Then she invited the children to create alongside her on the same canvas. Some of them even used their toes to draw.

"She transformed that canvas of scribbles into a communal piece of art that she gave to the class to display on the wall," Olson says. "Watching Rosie paint is so inspiring. I can't say her difference disappears, but her abilities shine through, and the children learn by her example that anything is possible."

Word traveled quickly within the school and administrators invited Rosie to paint for the school's Diversity Day. Soon, another elementary school asked Rosie to appear at an event too. "Interest in my work grew organically from word of mouth and I began painting at Girl Scout troops and at neighboring county's schools, and then in schools in other areas," Rosie says.

## **A growing mission**

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Since that first kindergarten class appearance, Rosie has headlined at more than 30 painting events, with students ranging in age from 5 to 17. Each one follows a similar format. After showing the kids a video clip of her painting with her toes on the beach, Rosie asks them to close their eyes and consider their own unique gifts. Then she invites a few volunteers to write their gift on the canvas with their toes.

After the kids return to their seats, Rosie turns on upbeat instrumental music and starts creating a masterpiece on that same canvas, working from the center — what she sees as the heart of the piece — outward. Children not only see her moving like a dancer as she applies the paint with her toes, but they sense a rhythm to her movements that's fearless, authentic and vulnerable.



Courtesy of Rosie Jon

"She makes the work look effortless, like you could do it, too," Olson says. "Then when you try it, you realize how difficult it is — and how perseverant you have to be to create art with your feet."

By the time Rosie finishes painting 20 minutes later, the kids are clapping to the beat of the music, moved by the whole experience. When Rosie reveals the artwork, she also explains the message it's designed to convey; that's there's power in diversity. "It's all about empowering kids," Rosie says. " My wish is for them to understand their significance; that even though they're young, they have the power to change the world for the better."

## Creating the world she wants to inhabit

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Rosie credits her Oxford admissions experience for helping her realize that as long as she believes in herself, anything is possible. When she was a new mom playing at the park with her kids, those feelings of fear resurfaced — but rather than letting that fear keep her down, she used it as a catalyst to celebrate her disability instead. "I decided that no one was going to define me or tell me what I could or could not achieve," she says.

| When we step out in courage, that's when magic happens

Everyone has something that makes them feel small, insecure or not enough. While creating her art, Rosie opens the door for kids to ask her big questions about their own struggles, like bullying, confidence and fitting in. They ask questions like, "Why don't you have arms?" "How do you brush your hair?" and "Can you play video games?" (She beat Bowser in the final level of Super Mario Deluxe with her toes.) It's that vulnerability that allows Rosie to touch kids' hearts.

"It's amazing to see the transformation that happens in that small space of time," Olson says. "Years later, parents tell me, 'My child still talks about Rosie.' Once they see her paint and hear her story, they don't see her as someone with no arms. They see her as someone who has this ability to do things they can't do."

During one event, Rosie asked Maddie Hostetter, a 9-year-old girl with one arm, to paint with her at a school event for 400 kids. "She's 13 now and she still remembers all of the kids cheering her on the day she painted with Rosie," says Maddie's mom, Heather Hostetter. "At the end of the event, the kids feel like they can do anything."

"We all have disabilities," she explains. "Some have visible ones like me. But others struggle with anxiety, differences we can't necessarily see. When we step out in courage, that's when magic happens."

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