



COMMUNITY

Former Foothill student making mark as accomplished artist, Paralympic athlete

By Jason Sweeney
Special to the Town Crier

It started as a three-week vacation but became a 16-month odyssey that took Gregory Burns through the heart of the Asian continent. He was an anomaly — a foreigner on crutches traveling much of the way alone, stopping to paint what caught his eye. As he painted, the crowds that gathered often grew so large that all he could see were arms and elbows.

The Asian sojourn of his youth left a deep and lasting impact.

"I think it set the stage for the rest of my life," Burns said. "It was really a turning point."

A Westerner on crutches was not a common sight in Asia in the mid-1980s. Burns slept in train stations and at temples. At one point, in Tibet, the constant travel and high altitude caused his hands to become chapped. A concerned Tibetan girl took four pieces of turquoise from her hair and gave them to him to buy lotion for his chapped hands — not knowing that Burns had more money in his pocket than she would see in a year.

"My disability caused a lot of curiosity and disconnect," Burns said, "but incredible compassion as well."

Burns began his journey with \$2,000 he had made in Taipei teaching English, swimming and painting. Sixteen months later, after traveling through China, Tibet, Nepal, India and Pakistan and back across China again, he still had \$400 left over.

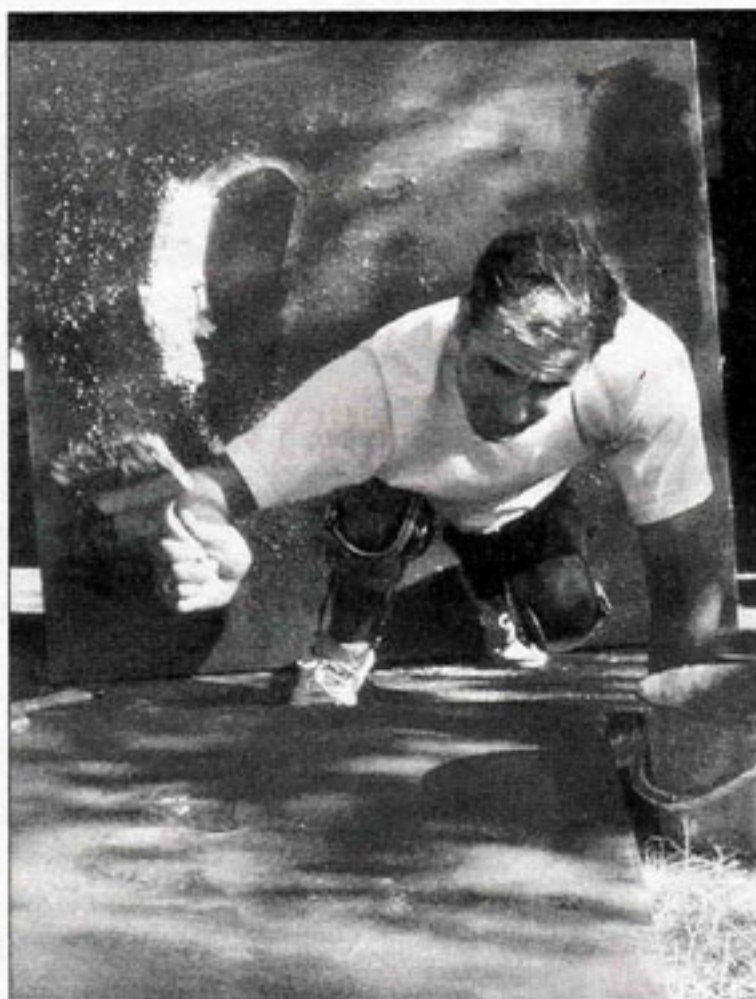
Burns' recently published book, "Painted Journey," is an anthology of the photographs, paintings and writings that chronicle his life.

It's been quite a life. Burns set five world records in swimming and won half a dozen gold and silver medals in swimming events that include the Barcelona, Atlanta and Sydney Paralympic Games. He has met presidents. He earned a master of fine arts degree from the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology in Australia. He has worked in the corporate world. But now he has dedicated his life to what he loves — art and teaching.

While his father, Robert Burns, was stationed in Jerusalem for the U.S. Foreign Service, Gregory, at 10 months of age, contracted polio, which left him dependent on crutches.

His father retired in 1977, and the family settled in the local area. Burns graduated from UC Santa Barbara and studied art for two years at Foothill, De Anza and Cabrillo colleges. He began competitive swimming at De Anza, doing much of his training at Foothill.

After being accepted into an international art



COURTESY GREGORY BURNS

Gregory Burns, shown here at work on an abstract painting, has just published "Painted Journey," a book detailing his life and his art.

program at San Jose State University, he left for Taipei and hasn't returned full time to the United States since.

But each year he returns to California. Burns' father lives in Santa Cruz, and his aunt, Helen Forster, is a Los Altos resident. "This is home base," Burns said. "It's my emotional base."

He recently became engaged to Angie Tan, a fellow traveler and collaborator on "Painted Journey." Tan did the layout and design and contributed many of the photographs for the book.

Burns plans to carry on with painting and exhibiting, and he's writing another book. He is also leading artist retreats for painters and photographers of different levels to exotic locales. The first retreat is scheduled for September at Angkor Wat, Cambodia, with the second scheduled for Bali, Indonesia.

Burns' art is on display at the Between Waters Gallery at the Allied Arts Guild in Menlo Park through May.

He is hosting an exhibition and book signing 7-9 p.m., May 6, at Torrefazione Italia Café in Palo Alto.

For more information, log on to www.gregory-burns.com.