

# SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS

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Nikki Grey, News Press Correspondent

**Art exhibit was his dying wish : "Painting Toward Grace" a one-man show by Michael Orchowski**  
Days before his debut art exhibit was set to open, Michael Orchowski died.

But as he would have wanted it, the show must go on.

The final wish of the Berlin, Germany, native, who succumbed to Lou Gehrig's Disease Nov. 25 at the age of 72, was for his paintings to be displayed in an art show. Thanks to Santa Barbara-based Dream Foundation — a national wish-granting organization for adults facing life-threatening illnesses — and a local jewelry store, his wish is being fulfilled through a benefit show and sale.

Starting Thursday, his works will go on display at 33 Jewels at El Paseo, 814 State St.

Mr. Orchowski worked as a biomedical engineer at a Fort Worth, Texas, pharmaceutical company before discovering that he had a brain tumor in 2007. With a six- to nine-month prognosis, and paralyzed on his right side, he soon retired and moved to Santa Barbara with his wife, Doedy.

Things started looking up when he discovered for the first time, through an art class at the Cancer Center of Santa Barbara, a love for painting. Lisa Hashbarger, the wellness program coordinator at the Cancer Center, said Mr. Orchowski channeled his emotions through his art.

"It was really a point of pride for him, something he enjoyed doing that kind of fed his need to heal," she said after his death.

After overcoming the obstacle of learning to paint with his non-dominant and also compromised left hand, Mr. Orchowski seemed to be in great spirits, said Ms. Hashbarger.

He outlived the prognosis related to the brain tumor, but in 2011 learned he had symptoms of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, aka Lou Gehrig's disease.

And so came his final wish.

Dream coordinator Katrina Viola described Mr. Orchowski as being "full of life." After reviewing his application and interviewing him earlier this month, Ms. Viola learned that Mr. Orchowski liked to paint with bright colors to express his love for life. Having this art show, titled "Painting Toward Grace," is a way for him to share that with people, she said.

The collage consists of several newspaper clippings from the Santa Barbara News-Press. The top clipping is the front page from Sunday, November 27, 2011, featuring a large photo of a woman sitting by a fountain and the headline "New GM making over Bacara". Other clippings include "Black Friday pepper spray suspect surrenders in L.A.", "Straw polls as tea leaves", and "Art exhibit was his dying wish". The bottom clipping is a Sunday edition with a "SUNDAY" banner and a photo of Michael Orchowski.

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"Despite how sick he is, he still stays hopeful and he hopes that other people can learn from that," Ms. Viola told the News-Press prior to Mr. Orchowski's passing. "Some people are pessimistic and they aren't even sick, and I think people can learn from (him)."

About 30 paintings will be on display. They consist of a series on Corgi dogs — which were inspired by his Corgi named Macey — landscapes, memories, and dreams of Mr. Orchowski.

Some paintings will be for sale, with the proceeds benefitting Dream Foundation and the Cancer Center's wellness program.

"They are very filled with color, playful, and whimsical, and I think that was part of his personality, as well," Ms. Hashbarger said of the paintings. "He wanted them to bring joy and happiness to people."

Diane Garmendia, owner of 33 Jewels, said the store had only about a week to plan after being notified of Mr. Orchowski's final wish; and she said many people in the community got involved to make the dream a reality.

Ms. Garmendia was touched by the nature of Mr. Orchowski's dream. While many people would want a trip to Disneyland or to visit the ocean before dying, she said, Mr. Orchowski wanted to move people through his art.

"He had me sit him up in his bed and he looked me in the eyes and said he wanted people to see the soul in each painting," Ms. Garmendia recalled of her first and only meeting with Mr. Orchowski.

She said Mr. Orchowski told her that he loved visiting art museums growing up in Berlin, and that "he knew (painting) was in him."

Ms. Garmendia said she finds it amazing that many people go through life fixating on minor day-to-day problems, but Mr. Orchowski, who was dying of ALS, didn't focus on the negative.

"In the face of great adversity, Michael chose to explore the beauty in life and express himself through his art," she said. "I imagine he was in a great deal of pain, but he didn't want that to be his final message. He rose above that."

As part of December's 1st Thursday cultural event, the opening reception for Mr. Orchowski's art show will take place 5 to 8 p.m. Thursday at 33 Jewels at El Paseo. Wine, beer and light refreshments will be provided.

Mr. Orchowski's art will continue to be displayed through early January, said Ms. Garmendia.

"He touched a lot of lives for sure, and his art will continue do to so," she said. That's what Mr. Orchowski would have wanted, for his art to help others.

It was he who requested that the proceeds from "Painting Toward Grace" benefit the Dream Foundation and the Cancer Center.

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"He had in him a way of cherishing life, and appreciating everybody that came in and helped him and was part of his community," Ms. Hashbarger said. "Whether you met him for the first time or had known him for a long time, he just kind of helped you find peace."