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PEOPLE IN THE NEWS



GILBERT TUHABONYE PRESENTS HIS ACCEPTANCE SPEECH TO THOSE IN ATTENDANCE.

SHINING STAR AWARD

Kansas City-based Assurant Employee Benefits presented its "Shining Star of Perseverance" award to former NCAA All-American runner and best-selling author Gilbert Tuhabonye. Through perseverance, Tuhabonye has overcome the effects of a severe physical injury. He leads a successful life and inspires others.

Born to a Tutsi tribe farming family in Burundi in east central Africa, Tuhabonye grew up in the midst of the centuries-old war between the Tutsi and Hutu tribes. In 1993, members of the Hutu tribe invaded Tuhabonye's high school and captured members of the Tutsi tribe, including Tuhabonye, following the assassination of Melchior Ndadaye, a Hutu and Burundi's first elected president. The captives were beaten and then burned alive in a building near the school. Tuhabonye, the only survivor, escaped after more than eight hours inside the burning building. He had been buried beneath the corpses of his friends.

Tuhabonye first came to the United States in 1996 as one of the select mem-

bers of the International Olympic Committee's development training camp for athletes from developing nations. In 1999, he was recruited as a runner by Abilene Christian University in Texas, where he earned All-American honors six times while completing a bachelor's degree.

As of today, Tuhabonye is the award-winning coach of Gilbert's Gazelle's, a training group consisting of hundreds of dedicated runners of all skill levels, as well as a best-selling author. Tuhabonye shares his life story in *This Voice in My Heart*, a testament to the triumph of the human spirit. In 2006, he co-founded the Gazelle Foundation, a charitable foundation with the mission to



2009 SHINING STAR OF PERSEVERANCE AWARD TROPHY, CREATED BY DISABLED ARTIST JERRY HYMEL OF HAMMOND, LA.

improve life for people in Burundi and offer education assistance to children in Austin, TX, where Tuhabonye lives with his wife and two daughters.

Tuhabonye was the seventh recipient of the national award given annually to honor those who have made a significant recent contribution toward demonstrating perseverance through disabling

illness or injury. Past Shining Star award recipients include Army veteran and *All My Children* actor J.R. Martinez, who fought and became disabled in the Iraq war and today uses his scars to inspire others; the authors of *Nordie's at Noon*, a book about coming together to reach the common goal of beating cancer; and former U.S. Senator Robert Dole, whose achievements following devastating battlefield injuries sustained during World War II inspired a generation of Americans.

Former major league umpire Steve Palermo, who overcame paralysis after being shot in 1991 and is an Assurant Employee Benefits's disability claimant, presented the award. "Tuhabonye's story is an outstanding example of everything the Shining Star award stands for," says Palermo. "His extraordinary perseverance has enabled him to emerge from an unthinkable ordeal and inspire so many other individuals on a daily basis."

BREAKING NEW GROUND

After losing her sight in her late thirties and subsequently achieving notable success as a painter, Ketra Oberlander founded the only artwork-licensing brand in the world exclusively representing artists with disabilities in a for-profit model. Oberlander breaks new ground in the art, licensing, giftware, and manufacturing industries at large, and within the disability community replete with artists (and would-be entrepreneurs) who long to earn an autonomous living as societal equals.

Oberlander's company Art of Possibility Studios locates and develops art and artists who, despite their respective disabilities, seek to earn independent income while uplifting and inspiring consumers with their creativity. In addition to source-

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ing talent, she negotiates licensing agreements with socially conscious, cause-oriented manufacturers seeking to feature Art of Possibility Studios's beautiful and meaningful imagery on their products.

Oberlander's own artwork—and the difficulty earning income related thereto—were the impetus for the agency. After a successful career as a writer and editor, she left publishing around the turn of the millennium when her vision started to fail and employment prospects concurrently diminished. Severe myopia, a lack of color and depth perception, and cone dystrophy conspired to rob her of her sight in her late thirties. By her fortieth birthday she was blind.

With some vision that, as she describes, is “like staring at the sun with shortening smeared on your glasses,” and a keen interest in visual perception and misperception, Oberlander decided to find a means to visually express the experience of her lost sight. At 40, she picked up a paintbrush for the first time and, despite her blindness, has become a true visionary.

Since “going pro” in 2005, Oberlander received numerous awards and widespread recognition for her work. However, although her artwork met with great success, her professional opportunities were limited by mobility challenges. She faced a constant stream of obstacles in the logistics of getting her original artwork in front of patrons at exhibitions and other common marketing venues. She had a problem and needed a solution and so her quest began.

Oberlander's research revealed that licensed artists largely worked from their studios, which solved her logistics problem. She also learned that there were no for-profit art resources exclusively focused on people with disabilities. Her



research inspired a larger business vision. She would represent herself and other people with disabilities though entirely talented and motivated artists with the same challenges.

Oberlander sought council from the best in the licensing business, who encouraged her to start her own agency. And she did.

Since launching Art of Possibility Studios in 2008, Oberlander has brought four other artists with disabilities into the fold. She met with a prospective licensee at its corporate offices—she cut her first deal; rolled out her first licensed product line (a set of four bookmarks featuring Art of Possibility Studios's images by various artists)—a pinnacle moment officiating that Ketra's dream had become a reality.

Now overseeing the agency, Oberlander hopes consumers of her licensed

KETRA OBERLANDER SHARES HER KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE AT ARTIST'S DAY.

products will not only appreciate their beauty at face value, but also take a moment to realize the magnitude of the purchase—direct support, liberation, and empowerment of an artist no longer dependent on charity and disability benefits or oppressed by logistical limitations in their quest for self-sufficiency.

Oberlander asserts, “I am not a noble person. I am a problem solver. I solve a financial and confidence problem for my artists. I solve a problem for manufacturers, desperate for beautiful and differentiated surface design and market positioning. I solve a problem for retailers, who won't need to discount the products. I solve a problem for consumers, who want to adorn their lives and the lives of others with meaningful goods that truly help create a better world.”

GIVING HOPE

The job market has been devastating to American families, but it has been doubly devastating for the disability community. About 70% of the disability community is currently unemployed. Seth Shannon, also deaf and an expert at diversity job placement, has taken every resource that he currently has to help the disability community find a source of income. Shannon helps unemployed individuals with disabilities create résumés. He conducts interview-training programs, and has provided self-esteem

