

# Our Town

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## Meet **EDWARD CREWS**

*In this issue dedicated to highlighting local heroes, you'll learn about people who do amazing things to help us live and thrive — people like Edward Crews, Program Director for the UF Health ShandsCair Critical Care Transport Program*





# *Wheelchair Highwaymen*

**Photography Brings Disability Awareness**



WRITTEN BY EMMA WITMER



Max, JR, and Gordon; A.K.A. "Wheelchair Highwaymen" are new Florida nature photographers. The daily challenges these men face and overcome have not stopped them from searching for and capturing beautiful moments. Their goal is to use technology, photography and nature to inspire and enrich the lives of individuals with and without disabilities.

**W**HEN THE SKY IS CLEAR, J.R. HARDING SAYS HE FLIES LIKE an eagle. In the fleeting moments between the melting sun and total darkness, he soars high above the ground, surveying the landscape ablaze with evening sun. Then, with a tilt of the head, Harding drives down to hover above the water, spying Florida wildflowers unfold into bloom and spiders mending their webs. As the blue of the sky gives way to blush, lilac and gold, Harding and his fellow photographers capture images that challenge the viewer's perception of the barriers between man and nature. The story behind the Wheelchair Highwaymen challenges this understanding in a whole new light.

Pictures are the speechless orators of a thousand words. Without the ability to speak or write, photographs tell stories, share ideas and divulge secrets. They provide windows into the eyes of the photographer, and insight in the mind of the viewer. Images carry with them a great equalizing property among the sighted.

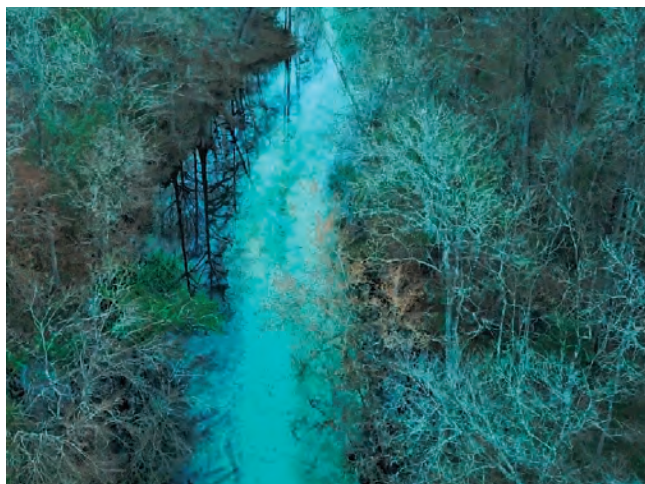
Harding, Gordon Palmer and Max Lee have spent much of their lives in the pursuit of such properties of equality.

The pursuit of equality is a narrative familiar to this nation. Civil rights battles have been hard fought by groups like African Americans, women, and particularly in the last 30 years, people with disabilities. These fights are never succinct, and the civil rights movement for peoples with disabilities is no exception. The Americans with Disabilities Act, commonly referred to as the ADA, was signed into law by President George H. W. Bush on July 26, 1990 on the White House lawn. The legislation was intended to protect individuals with disabilities from discrimination in the workplace, education system, transportation system and public spaces.

When he signed the ADA in front of some 2,000 onlookers, President Bush said, "Let the shameful walls of exclusion finally come tumbling down."

But not all forms of exclusion can be abolished by pen and ink. In March of 1990, protesters with disabilities did not just march on the nation's capital to press congress to pass the ADA. They crawled. They abandoned canes, crutches and wheelchairs to pull themselves up the steps, fingernails to stone. This demonstration helped to facilitate major change in the way America approached accessibility, affording individuals with disabilities the opportunity to work, learn and live in spaces that had previously been denied due to prejudice, or simply because there were no accommodating resources like ramps, interpreters and so on.





**Access is a key word when discussing the civil liberties of individuals with disabilities. Legislation like the ADA has been instrumental in giving individuals with disabilities access to the public.**

Through drone technology, the Wheelchair Highwaymen have been able to reopen the door to the natural world — inspiring both those with and without disabilities.

Long before Lee, Harding and Palmer began their joint-venture into nature photography as the Wheelchair Highwaymen, they took their fight to the Florida Legislature. Lee, Harding and Palmer were each injured as young men, rendering Lee paraplegic and Harding and Palmer quadriplegic. In their individual professional lives, Palmer served as a Florida state attorney for nearly 30 years and now volunteers for organizations such as the Florida Disabled Outdoor Association, Lee is the president and principal engineer at Koolger and Associates where he uses his skills as an expert in ADA compliance, and Harding works with the Florida State University College of Business while

acting as a consultant, public speaker and author using his experience in civil rights for individuals with disabilities legislation. Together, they have worked as advocates for the continuation of civil rights advancement for individuals with disabilities through charitable organizations and in state and federal legislatures.

“If you think about it, [the ADA passed] just 30 years ago when folks were given basic access to be able to use the sidewalk, get in the front door, go to the restaurant and the movie theatre, which isn’t asking for a whole lot,” Harding said. “Now we are continuing this story and talking about, ‘What are the other parts of life that we should be able to



enjoy, should be able to experience and use the different tools of life to be able to facilitate that enjoyment.”

Access is a key word when discussing the civil liberties of individuals with disabilities. Legislation like the ADA has been instrumental in giving individuals with disabilities access to the public. Lee explains that there is an intimate tie between the ADA and the future of activism for individuals with disabilities. Particularly when it comes to the rapid advancement of technology in recent decades.

“With access, we can do cool stuff,” Lee said with a smile.

When Lee was a teen, he did studio work under a photographer named Brain Rogers, whose focus was in commercial photography. On his own, Lee was interested in nature photography, spending hours in the dark room developing his photos by hand.



Max Lee signs one of the Wheelchair Highwaymen's photos during their debut show on March 15 at The Perfect Gift in Haile Village Center. Their next show "Spring Colors Cascade" will take place on Friday, May 10 (5-7:30 pm) at the same location.

When Lee was injured at age 17, the community rallied around him, collecting donations to send him to photography school in Atlanta. Back then, however, equipment was bulky, and the burden of hauling a huge duffle bag of heavy cameras weighed him down. In the mid-1990s, Lee sold his equipment, putting his love of photography on the back burner. In the mid-2000s, Lee was in France with a friend

who introduced him to Martine Franck, photographer and wife of Henri Cartier Bresson. The two spent a week photographing the city of Paris and beyond, briefly reigniting Lee's artistic passion. But, Lee had a career, and he chose to focus on that.

“With nature, you don't have all this, ‘Oh, I'm pissed about it.’ You just block it out. It just doesn't exist,” Lee said of the strain that his disability has put on his ability to experience the outdoors.

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Some two years ago, however, Lee found something cool to try. Drones. The drone's camera allowed him to maneuver in ways that his chair would not allow, capturing interesting photographs. This technology, Lee realized, offered him the access to the natural world that had become inaccessible. He called Palmer and Harding, and soon the men began planning trips and photographing the Floridian landscape as a group, the Wheelchair Highwaymen.

These trips involve more than just grabbing a camera and hitting the road. Because of their motorized wheelchairs, the Wheelchair Highwaymen diligently track weather patterns and natural light schedules to choose the optimal time to shoot.

Lee is able to maneuver the drones using his hands and arms, but Harding and Palmer are more limited. Instead, they wear goggles that are linked into the drone's camera and directional system. The Wheelchair Highwaymen are able to see what the drone sees by looking through the goggles, and by moving their heads up, down, left or right, can direct the aircraft's flight pattern. Through this technology, the Wheelchair Highwaymen have been able to reopen the door to the natural world.

Since the friends began photography as a hobby, they have built on their skills of capturing unique images and developing them in a way that tells a story. The story, Lee said, is liberation.

"It's freedom," Harding added, "It's liberating. It gives you a moment to forget that you're a person with a disability."

The result of this practice has been a series of captivating, ethereal images captured from on high. The Wheelchair Highwaymen now have prints displayed in the Gainesville Courthouse and North Central Florida businesses. Their prints are for sale at The Perfect Gift in the Haile Village Center, and the men are in talks to present a show in the 22nd floor gallery in the State Capitol building. The Wheelchair Highwaymen are connecting with audiences through their art first, disability second. Still, work like theirs is characteristic of the new wave of activism and empowerment in the community of people with disabilities.

"It's a continuation of the civil rights story," Harding said. "There's that natural tie-in in the outdoors. It's one of those pieces that we're still unraveling." **OT**





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