

Wheelchair Highwaymen soar with drone photos

Amanda Sieradzki
Council on Culture & Arts

Spidery shadows of cattle yawn across green pastures in the Wheelchair Highwaymen's photograph "Dali Cows." "Blue Cross Roads" reveals Florida waterways' icy azure veins and "Santa Fe Blush" cruises over reddened fall leaves.

Highwayman J.R. Harding relishes these quiet moments he co-captures with his "brothers" and fellow Wheelchair Highwaymen and Florida State alumni Gordon Palmer and Max Lee.

Their "Beloved Florida" exhibition at the Tallahassee Museum welcomes visitors to experience the state's natural beauty from new heights as they merge drone technology with the environment. Each photograph's painterly quality portrays stunning landscapes that are awash in every imaginable hue.



JR Harding

"Photography is yet another way I can give back and express my appreciation to the community," says Harding, a quadriplegic, faculty member at FSU's College

of Business, and author. "This town and the state of Florida has enabled me to be unshackled from the perceived bondage of paralysis and be free to live to explore life's endless possibilities without fear."

Harding has been asked to speak and testify for the United States Congress and the Florida Legislature for persons with disabilities, making significant contributions to shaping public policy. As he straps on a headset, he soars high above local parks as the drone becomes both his legs and lens.

Photography is yet another platform for Harding to share his perspective and advocate for the disability community's inclusion in outdoor recreation. It was through meeting and learning from Lee that Harding found a love for drone photography.

At the beginning, Harding says they were simply "boys being boys playing with toys." But soon, they sought to share their experiences and adopted their moniker, the Wheelchair Highwaymen after the Florida Highwaymen — a collective of 26 African American landscape artists who persevered in the face of great racial adversity during the civil rights era.

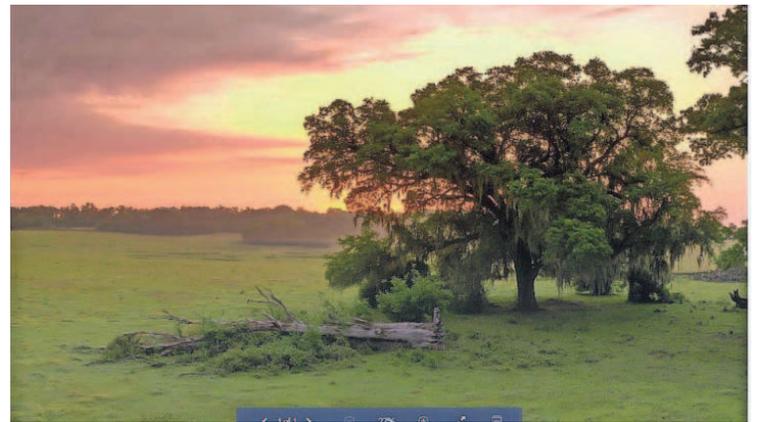
"The disability community learned from women and people of color on how to fight for your rights, tear down barriers and express yourself," says Harding. "We use technology as an equalizing tool in this form of expression and civil rights. We want to remind people that



Florida Risen is among the photos at "Beloved Florida" exhibit at Tallahassee Museum. JR HARDING



Deep Blue Down is part of the "Beloved Florida" exhibit at Tallahassee Museum. JR HARDING



Cholupaha Siempre is part of Their "Beloved Florida" exhibition at the Tallahassee Museum. JR HARDING

everybody is not treated equally in all aspects of life."

For Harding and the Wheelchair Highwaymen, this means bringing awareness to how local and state parks must either maintain or provide accessible pathways in outdoor facilities and nature trails.

Not only does drone photography become a tool that he uses to explore natural surroundings on hikes locally, but it also makes his world accessible in new ways. Though he did not receive formal training, Harding says he has always appreciated pictures' abilities to capture moments in time and hopes his landscape photography will achieve that and more.

"It's a way to bring the outdoors to those who are sitting on the sidelines wanting to see some of the things we see and how we see them," says Harding.

As a young Eagle Scout, Harding recalls coming home from school on Fridays, grabbing his hiking gear and heading out into the woods for the weekend. He loved disappearing into the outdoors to journey into new worlds. Now, when he is "flying," he regains this mobility,

If you go

What: Beloved Florida: Photographs of the Wheelchair Highwaymen

When: 9 a.m.-5 p.m. daily through May 31

Where: Tallahassee Museum, 3945 Museum Drive

Cost: \$12 Adults, \$11.50 Seniors and Students, \$9 Children (4-15), Free for Members and children under 3

Contact: For more information, visit tallahasseeemuseum.org.

taking screenshots using his headset at the sight of every new color and perspective. His stomach drops with every dip and dive as he seeks to bring this three-dimensional experience to life.

The Wheelchair Highwaymen had their first exhibition one year ago in Gainesville.

Harding says they shared 200 pieces of artwork and sold over half as 500 people came out to see and support their work. He was in awe of the response and how so many continue to be

touched by the beauty of Florida.

For the Tallahassee Museum exhibition, Harding is grateful to curator Susan Baldino, a representative with Arts4All Florida, an organization that provides opportunities for all abilities in the arts.

With every photograph, Harding also hopes to continue cultivating a respect for mother nature — holding true to his Eagle Scout pledge to "leave things better than you found them" — while reaching out into the disability community and inspiring individuals to visit city, state and national parks.

"The community as a whole has been incredibly generous to me as a person and any way I can give back to them is my obligation and privilege," says Harding. "Part of giving back to me is trying to represent the many different abilities found within our community so that all of us can have fun together. I always felt no matter what, art is a way I could do that and contribute."

Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).