



## PARTICIPANT PROFILE

### Michael Cruse, Sr. – *the Gentle Giant*

Michael Cruse, from Alma, Arkansas, is a 57-year-old disabled combat veteran of Vietnam who has received care in the VA system since 1972. Cruse joined the Navy at 17 and was assigned to the USS George Mackenzie DD836 for three years, serving in underwater demolitions.

Over the years, Cruse has been treated for Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), seizure disorder, nerve deterioration related to Agent Orange exposure, as well as major leg, back and neck impairments which required past and future surgical intervention. Cruse also copes with numbness in his extremities and a partial right forearm paralysis.

Sometimes referred to as a “gentle giant,” Cruse is a tall man with a large frame, his imposing physical appearance belying the fine motor movements required to paint his delicate designs on porcelain china. His ability to create this beautiful work is a tribute to his amazing determination and perseverance in the face of severely limiting emotional and physical disabilities.

Because of his PTSD, Cruse spent much of his adult life in complete isolation, even from his family. He became a recluse for 18 years while living in the Ozark National Forest in Arkansas. Cruse says he did this to avoid social interaction that might trigger explosive and dangerous displays of anger and inappropriate emotional reactions. Seven years ago, Cruse began the slow and painstaking process of learning to paint porcelain china. This process requires multiple applications of design and repeated firings. A piece well on the way to completion could easily be spoiled by one missed stroke of the brush. He must also paint his designs within tiny parameters on curved surfaces—a difficult challenge for fingers that cannot feel the brush they are holding. Cruse’s condition causes him to drop many things unpredictably, including paintbrushes.

This year, Cruse’s winning piece is entitled “Hummingbird Hollow.” Inspired by his time living in the mountains, he recalls passing by a spring where hummingbirds would gather. “They had such beautiful color and brought me so much peace by watching them,” he recalls. Cruse paints his original designs on top of rough pencil guidelines applied to the bisque ware by his wife, Leta, who provides the only help he receives in the entire painting and firing process. Many firings are required to complete a piece, so a single dish or bowl could take several months of work with the ever-present risk of losing the piece until its last firing.

Cruse’s achievements are extraordinary. He credits an increased ability to control his hand movements to his art. He has overcome his profoundly limited frustration tolerance in a medium that would leave most people frustrated. Now, Cruse has refined his skills and is practicing them with other people, exposing himself to the social situations once so painful to him. He has given himself a creative outlet and a great source of joy in spite of the burden of guilt he carries from his combat experiences in Vietnam. In speaking with the artist, you hear a renewed sense of joy. “I’m probably the only man in Arkansas who belongs to the World Organization of China Painters,” he says with a smile.