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SEPTEMBER 2022

LIVING



Domenic Esposito

THE UNFORESEEN SPOKESMAN
IN THE WAR AGAINST OPIOIDS

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Rick Bern Photography

Domenic Esposito

THE UNFORESEEN SPOKESMAN
IN THE WAR AGAINST OPIOIDS



Domenic, seen working in his studio, began sculpting eight years ago.

By **Tom Leyden**

Photos By **Rick Bern Photography**

How did it all start?

Only five words, but a huge question surrounding the journey of Domenic Esposito, a sculptor and longtime Westwood resident who made national headlines in 2018 thanks to his powerful works of art – and the message behind them.

We'll get to the headlines, but first, the impetus.

Esposito is a parishioner at St. Margaret Mary Catholic Church. In 2017, he was approached by Fr. Stephen Linehan and asked to address the congregation about the Archbishop's Annual Appeal. Linehan frequently called on his parishioners to personalize the appeal and Esposito did some homework before making his fundraising pitch.

"I looked up all these services the Archdiocese offers," said Esposito. "One was the recovery service Fr. Joe White offers in the west end in Boston. I'd heard about it."

Domenic had heard about Fr. Joe's program because he had tried to get his brother, Danny, admitted. Danny has battled substance use disorder for more than a decade and the fight is personal to the Esposito family. During his pitch, Domenic conveyed that personal connection to the congregation.

"After the speech, we had coffee and doughnuts in the church basement," said Esposito. "I got to meet some of the parishioners and I was hearing things like, 'You know, my son or daughter is dealing with the same thing,' or 'My grandson - he's been living in this sober home.'"

"I didn't realize it was such a widespread problem, even in a suburban town like Westwood," said Esposito. "That got me thinking about how I can use my art to be a voice – to get help! I had people at the church telling me they had to pay for their grandson's recovery and trust me, this is expensive. You can't write a \$200,000 check and say, 'Go save



The original Opioid Spoon (right) sits next to a wooden pattern used to sand cast additional spoons at the foundry.

my grandson's life.' It doesn't work that way. It's a very long process. So, that got me this anger."

Through the anger came great inspiration. Domenic, who spent decades in finance, now dedicated his life to creating disruptive art. That dedication gave birth to The Opioid Spoon Project.

"As an artist, I think in a lot of what you do, 90% of it is the idea," said Esposito. "10% is the execution, but 90% is the idea. So that was, to me, the big revelation. This is prevalent. I'm not the only one. Something needs to happen. I've always been intrigued with guerrilla art. We needed



Domenic describes "Assailable," his bronze sculpture mounted on oil canvas.

to get people's attention."

After months of research, labor and effort, Esposito ultimately made an enormous splash on June 22, 2018, placing a giant opioid spoon sculpture, 800 pounds in weight, outside the headquarters of Purdue Pharma in Stamford, CT. Among those on hand was a crew from The New York Times.

"They ran it like an art article," said Esposito. "It was a great review with photos and everything but it was the Associated Press that really made it take off nationally.

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“We had already dropped the spoon. The gallery owner was arrested,” said Esposito. “The police impounded the spoon, there were about 10 police cars and 20 police officers there. The whole street was closed down. It was crazy mayhem. And then my phone rings.

“It was someone from the Associated Press who wanted to ask me a few questions. I was like, ‘Uh, we’re kind of in the middle of a protest, but go ahead.’ The answers to those questions made it out, word-for-word, across the country – USA Today, The LA Times, everybody picked it up and we were the top news article on Google. I had an old boss in California call me and say, ‘You’re the top story on Google, what the hell are you doing?’”

And that’s how it happens.

Since that wild day, Esposito has “dropped spoons” at many other locations – Rhodes Technologies in Coventry, Rhode Island, the Department of Health and Human Services in Washington D.C., the headquarters of Johnson and Johnson among others – each sculpture featuring a unique branding on the spoon’s base.

“Here I am, this spokesman for this stuff, and I used to say, ‘Am I really a spokesman?’ But you really do evolve into it, you know what I mean? You realize, ‘Wait, I know a lot about this. I’ve been dealing with this for 12 years with my brother.’ There’s a certain expertise that comes with knowledge. It’s the survival skills. That’s what I was bringing to the table - the survival skills from my brother and my family.”

THE ARTIST

Sitting in Domenic’s studio at his home in Westwood, surrounded by incredibly powerful sculptures and paintings capturing the essence of loneliness that accompanies addiction, we talk about his artistic background and the unique juxtaposition between his successful financial career and his pursuit of artwork as a full-time commitment.

“There was no serious game plan,” said Esposito. “I started taking a lot of welding classes. The guy who taught those classes happened to be a sculptor and so I just got involved. I loved it – the sense of the heat,

welding things. This was eight years ago. Remember, I was still in finance, so I would rush out of work to do this stuff.”

His background in finance, as it turns out, opened some unexpected doors to the art world.

“When you’re in finance you spend time in some fancy hotels and I would pay attention to how the drapes look with the bed, how colors come together,” said Esposito. “I always loved design and that was like an art to me. I also took a lot of photography classes at Northeastern. There was never a game plan, but one thing led to another. I bought my own welding machine. I just kept taking more and more classes – Mass College of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, sketching, I did residencies. It became a part of who I am.”

While there may not have been a game plan, there was a firm list of goals Esposito looked to achieve over a five-year period once he made his choice – art over finance.

“I’m the type of person when I say I’m going to do something, I’m not going to do it 20%, 30%,” said Esposito. “It’s 100 or nothing. I dropped everything, even finance, and focused on art as my career.”

THE NEXT VISION

The Opioid Spoon Project has become a 501(c)(3) charity dedicated to raising awareness about the nation’s rabid opioid epidemic. In 2021, more than 100,000 people died of an overdose and more than 80,000 of those deaths were due to opioids.

“I didn’t realize that the opioid issue was so big until I got involved in a Westwood High School organization,” said Helen Coates, a Westwood resident and member of the Board of Directors at The Opioid Spoon Project. “I’ve known Domenic for about twenty years. Our kids went to school together. He suggested I watch a documentary called ‘Dopesick,’ which I did and I was completely mortified. After watching that, I jumped on board and said if there’s anything I can do to help, let me know.”

While the organization maintains its commitment to change the staggering figures that continue to rise, Esposito is also focused on his



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The first of many bronze panels that will be featured in Domenic's next major vision, The Memorial Door Project.

next major vision, The Memorial Door Project.

Imagine, if you can, an enduring landmark memorial honoring those who battled substance use disorder. Think back to the late 80s and early 90s, when the famous AIDS Quilt left an indelible mark on the country, recognizing those we lost to a dreadful disease. That's what Esposito wants The Memorial Door Project to be.

The memorial will showcase eight narrative bronze panels set in a large public sculpture. Each panel will depict a memory of a loved one enjoying the normalcy of his or her life pre-addiction. Ideally, the memorial will be showcased in a major city, its attention to detail and vivid depictions easily accessible to thousands, recalling the style of Renaissance artists who told stories through bronze doors, like those found at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

"I meet so many people and they tell me their story about their son or daughter," said Esposito. "He was an athlete. He pitched and he loved baseball. Or they post a photo on social media about their trip to Disney and how memorable that was, or the kid getting the driver's license. The point is that there is always a story of normalcy in their mind. They didn't tell you about picking him up off 'Mass and Cass.' That's not the story they're gonna tell you. For me, it was the stories of normalcy. How do I tell these stories?"

Esposito has already completed the first panel, a painstaking effort that took months of vision, sketching, planning, casting, molding and sculpting. He depicts a band, including a drummer who was later lost to opioids. The band is practicing in the drummer's basement, rattling his mother's china in the kitchen above with each pulsating beat.



Domenic's work has been highlighted and featured in lights in New York's Times Square.

"What I wouldn't give to hear that china rattle again," was the quote Esposito recalls from his conversation with the drummer's mom.

From start to finish, a single bronze panel can take up to eight months to complete and cost thousands of dollars. His vision is costly, but the impact would be everlasting, a tribute to those who fight and those who love them.

"The idea is to have this become a national monument to the opioid crisis," said Esposito. "So we're working on the pitch book right now, and going around to different cities and towns telling them about the project. We've been raising money. We have \$27,000 in the coffers. The project is relatively expensive, so our hope is that we cover half of it and the city or town covers the other half and donates some space."

If Domenic has learned anything, it's that no journey is taken alone and working together makes the obstacles seem less daunting.

Join Domenic Esposito September 30 at 7pm at The Beacon Gallery, 524 Harrison Avenue, Boston as he participates on a panel about Art Therapy - "Art For Conversation With Yourself And Others - Using your creative side to learn and grow."

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