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## U.S. PARALYMPICS



# Local Artist Connects Visitors To Paralympic Athletes Through Art Showcased At Olympic & Paralympic Training Center



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BY MELISSA ZHANG | JULY 22, 2019, 10:13 A.M. (ET)



*Gina Klawitter's artwork has been hung in the Visitor's Center at the OPTC in Colorado Springs.*

When people come to the U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Training Center (OPTC) in Colorado Springs, Colorado, they're greeted with plenty of exciting things to see.

There are new pieces of art to see as well.

Three art pieces, which is the work of Denver-based artist Gina Klawitter, have recently been hung on display at the Visitor's Center.

Klawitter's artwork depicts three Paralympic athletes who live and train in Colorado Springs: swimmer Sophia Herzog (<https://www.gklawitter.com/news/2019/3/13/sculpting-sophia>), cyclist Brandon Lyons (<https://www.gklawitter.com/news/2019/4/22/sculpting-brandon>) and cyclist Mohamed Lahna (<https://www.gklawitter.com/news/2019/7/8/sculpting-paralympian-mohamed-lahna>). She has written about each project on her website (<https://www.gklawitter.com/>).

"I've always portrayed people of different shapes, colors and backgrounds through my art," Klawitter said. "If I can move people to become more aware of their thoughts and actions toward others, and also help people to love their own appearance, then making art means so much more to me."

Klawitter first began working with Team USA earlier this year, when she reached out to the OPTC to see if she could portray athletes through art.

She ended up focusing solely on Paralympic athletes.

"[Mike Beagley, community relations manager at the U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Committee] mentioned the Paralympic athletes and that was such a gift," Klawitter said. "I thought, wow – this could be really fascinating."

The first athlete that Klawitter worked with was Paralympic swimming silver-medalist and Colorado native, Sophia Herzog. Herzog also creates art as a way to unwind and relax when she isn't training, so the two worked together to make a sculpture of Herzog swimming through water.

"My hope is that visitors will see power and strength and that anything is achievable, no matter the body type, as long as you put your mind to it," Herzog wrote in an Instagram post revealing the piece. "When there's a will, there's a way."

Klawitter soon followed up with two more pieces with Lyons and Lahna.

"I really wanted to make sure that the art represented them well; it comes right from them," Klawitter said, who uses a unique method with fabric to mold an authentic figure from her subjects. "I've been delighted and gratified to see that the art is fulfilling for the athletes and is fulfilling my intention."

She was also excited to see the organization's recent name change to the U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Committee, a significant step in reaching parity for Olympic and Paralympic athletes.

"I was delighted to see [the name change] because not only am I honoring these Paralympians with this art, but my mission has always been inclusion. The name change really symbolizes that Paralympians are athletes in every sense of the word" Klawitter said. "After working with Paralympic athletes, I'm hooked. My goal is to go watch them compete at the Paralympic Games Tokyo 2020."

Her three subjects have all been busy representing Team USA in competitions.

Lyons most recently competed at the 2019 U.S. Para-cycling Road National Championships in Knoxville, Tennessee last month, as Lahna earned two national titles at the 2019 USA Cycling Para-cycling Track National Championships in Carson, California, in the MC2 kilo time trial and individual pursuit this July.

Herzog will be racing in the 2019 World Para Swimming Championships in London this September after breaking the SB6 200-meter breaststroke world record last month.

Klawitter hopes to continue making art of Paralympic athletes to display on campus.

"I just turned 60, but I feel like I'm hitting the best time of my life right now. I feel the same inspiration and determination as these young athletes do," Klawitter said. "Showing the beauty of all these different athletes and telling their stories has been really gratifying. I hope the art encourages people to come here and engage with the Paralympians in a new way."

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