

[Home \(/\)](#) / [Features \(/features\)](#)

Artists in Recovery Find Their Fix in "The Creative High"

By Olivia Pennelle (/bio/olivia-pennelle) 01/23/19

Creativity — making art — is another way to find that aliveness and spiritual connection often sought through drugs and alcohol. The creative process can be transformative for people with addiction.



It felt very important to tell a different story than the celebrity story. So many films, TV shows, memoirs have been put out that tell the dramatic story of famous people struggling with addiction. - Image via "The Creative High"

Recovery that consists of meetings, step work, and an unfulfilling job makes for a very black-and-white life — at least for me it did. That wasn't the recovery I wanted. I was bored. When I got involved in creative endeavors, however, it was like adding color back into my world. For some people, creative expression becomes a new high.

As I started to explore creativity and art, I realized that I'd opened a door to a part of me that had been closed since I started using drugs. As a child, I loved painting and crafting. I reignited that passion and began expressing myself in new ways: blogging, writing and journaling; painting and drawing; making art and attending craft classes; and creating new recipes. My world feels so much more livable with art in it.

I'm not alone, fellow creative Jules (<http://twobitchesandjules.com/journal/>) tells me: "Art is everything, really. I don't care if you write, paint, dance, sculpt, make movies, or whatever. It's a way to choose an expression to share who you were and who you're becoming. We're all messes of insecurity and works in progress. The key is to keep working."

A big stumbling block for many of us is that we don't know where to start, and, like Jules says, we have insecurity about our work. That's where artist Tammi Salas (<https://www.tammisalas.com/>) comes in. Over the past few years, Tammi has been sharing her creative journey in recovery. Through Instagram (<https://www.instagram.com/tammisalas/?hl=en>), the #RecoveryGalsArtExchange (<https://www.instagram.com/explore/tags/recoverygalsartexchange/?hl=en>), her podcast *The Unruffled* (<https://www.tammisalas.com/podcast/>), and other ventures, Tammi gives us a starting point and inspires us to play.

"Art helped me fill the void alcohol once occupied. My entire recovery is centered around making and creating art," she says. "Not a day goes by without me tapping into my creative groove and seeing what comes out. Art anchors me and helps me reframe old stories and visually create new ones."

San Francisco-based filmmaker, educator, and arts therapist Adriana Marchione (<http://www.adrianamarchione.com/resources/my-artist-story-in-recovery-magazine/>) finds her creative outlet in film. For the last 20 years, she has been dedicated to supporting people struggling with substance use disorder and other addictions. Recently, she directed a new a documentary feature-length film, *The Creative High* (<https://www.thecreativehigh.com/>).

The Creative High Footage Teaser, Spring 2018 (<https://vimeo.com/256695421>) from Adriana Marchione (<https://vimeo.com/user27113128>) on Vimeo (<https://vimeo.com>).

The documentary shares the stories of working artists — including Wesley Geer of Rock to Recovery and Ralph Spight, a punk musician who plays with Jello Biafra from the Dead Kennedys — who have faced addiction. The film reveals their transformational paths to recovery, and the natural “high” of making art. *The Creative High* brings the viewer into the world of hip-hop, drag performance, punk music, dance, theater, and visual art, demonstrating “the tension that exists between the altered states of creativity and addictive behavior.”

Adriana Marchione took some time out of her schedule to discuss her creative process with *The Fix*.

***The Fix*: How has art and creativity influenced your own journey in recovery?**

Adriana: I came into recovery 25 years ago as a photographer/visual artist, and at that time I didn't see a lot of creative role models in recovery. To be safe and away from triggers around my addiction that mainly stemmed from alcohol abuse and unhealthy relationships, I felt that I needed to move away from my creative life and artist connections. Life slowly became manageable. I started to heal, I found peace of mind, but I missed the excitement and vibrancy that my art making gave me. I found more internal ways to express myself (art journaling, poetry, small collages) versus making art to exhibit or be in environments where I mingled with other

creatives and had to confront drinking and social life — galleries, parties, bars. This led me to study expressive arts therapy after several years into recovery, and then I made a career out of this. This has been incredibly rewarding to me, giving me a life of purpose, and also finding a focus where I specialize in working with addiction recovery, and artists who face addictions and eating disorders.

Along the way, I have found new ways to express myself: improv performance, Argentine tango, being an art curator for many years, and coming back to my love of media through filmmaking over the last five years. It also took a while (and continues to challenge me) to find the balance with creating art and being public in art making, taking risks but still being grounded in recovery.

What motivated you to create this film, and what does it represent to you?

Being dedicated to a creative project of substance and collaborating with the film team has been one of my hopes and visions in recovery. For the last 18 years, I have focused on art therapy and supporting people one-on-one or in a teaching setting, but when I started making documentaries I felt a strong calling to tell stories and make a larger statement through my art. Films have the power to do that.

My first documentary film, *When the Fall Comes*, was released in 2014 and was about my personal journey with grief and using the arts to heal. This film gave me the inspiration to do more films because I realized how many people a film can reach and what a rich experience it is to be involved in the making of a film. It is also a passion project since the topic of creativity and addiction is so close to my heart. This is something I have lived and watched others struggle with in my work — how to have a creative life successful in recovery. I wanted to tell the artist's story from a new perspective, with many voices. I wanted to give hope to artists in recovery and artists who are still caught in addictive cycles, but I also wanted to show how the arts can be an important vehicle for healing in recovery.

In what ways do you think the film will speak to both people in recovery and to those seeking it?

I hope this film will give people a window into the real challenges and successes that artists who have suffered from substance use disorders face. I also think it is important for people to speak publicly about their addictions, so the public can see that recovery happens and so that we can continue to combat stigma that comes along with the disease of addictions.

Some of the artists in the film have had to go through a process with this, and I applaud their courage and willingness to reveal their stories with the public. I hope that people viewing the film will have a deeper sense of the highs and lows that accompany the creative process and take the risk to create. I also want to convey the fact that seeking an alternative “high” through making art gives another channel to find that aliveness and spiritual connection often sought through drugs and alcohol. Art can be the new medicine, one that is productive and meaningful rather than destructive and life-diminishing.

You chose nine working artists from diverse backgrounds to feature in the film, rather than choosing celebrities. What unique qualities do you think that will bring to the overall production?

It felt very important to tell a different story than the celebrity story. So many films, TV shows, memoirs have been put out that tell the dramatic story of famous people struggling with addiction. Addiction affects us all in some way, and there are so many artists who live ordinary lives (and extraordinary as well) who are trying to be successful with their art without falling into addictive behaviors. Documenting a variety of stories, from musicians to dancers to visual artists, shows all different sides of life. We wanted to show many recovery perspectives and how each one is unique but they all experience the power of the arts practice.

Conceptualizing and producing a film is a huge task. What other challenges have you faced making a film that was funded through donations?

Making a feature-length documentary is a huge feat that requires endless determination. We have been making *The Creative High* and are now in post-production, which is the most expensive part of making a film. We have pursued many avenues for funding including applying to grants, crowdfunding, reaching out to private foundations, and seeking investors, sponsors and executive producers. In general, funding is not easy to procure for independent films, and we have found that the most effective way to gather the funds has been through individuals making small donations that add up. We are very open at this completion stage to have sponsors and executive producers join us with larger donations to help us get to the finish line!

Last, how can we support your fundraising?

You can support our fundraising by making a donation here (<https://fromtheheartproductions.networkforgood.com/projects/12963-documentaries-the-creative-high>). The sooner we gather our remaining funding, the faster we can complete the film and get its message to the public. All donations are tax-deductible.

Find out more about director Adriana Marchione's work: www.adrianamarchione.com (<http://www.adrianamarchione.com>)

How do you express yourself in recovery? Tell us below.

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Olivia Pennelle (/bio/olivia-pennelle)

Located in Portland, OR, Olivia Pennelle (Liv) is an experienced writer, journalist, and coach. She is the founder of the popular site Liv's Recovery Kitchen (<https://livesrecoverykitchen.com/>), a site dedicated to helping people flourish in their recovery. Liv is passionate about challenging limiting mentalities and empowering others to direct their own lives, health, and recovery. You can find her articles across the web on podcasts and addiction recovery websites, including Recovery.org, Workit Health, Ravishly, Recovery Campus, and The Recovery Village. Liv was recently featured in VICE (https://tonic.vice.com/en_us/article/ywq4kk/my-addictions-defined-me-before-i-got-sober). Find Liv on Twitter (<https://twitter.com/LivsRecoveryKit>), Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/LivsRecoveryKitchen/>), and LinkedIn (<https://www.linkedin.com/in/oliviapennelle>).

Liv also co-hosts a podcast — Breaking Free: Your Recovery. Your Way. Listen here (<https://soundcloud.com/breakingfreerecovery>).

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3



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**Tarzana
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Alumni praise the evidence-based treatment, plentiful amenities, and compassionate staff at this Southern California facility that aims to guide clients on a path of physical, mental, and spiritual health.

4

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5

Vanity Wellness Center (/vanity-wellness-center)

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Alumni of this San Fernando Valley outpatient facility praise the family-like atmosphere and credit the program for giving them the skills and tools they need to succeed post-treatment.

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