

A Grand Vision

Jeff Hanson is a young man with limited vision and a clear view of life's big picture.

Jeff Hanson is an extraordinary teenager whose unshakable optimism in the face of a devastating disease proves infectious for anyone crossing his path—anyone including the world's most beloved pop-rock star and a Hollywood movie director.

The 14-year-old budding artist started a summer driveway business in 2006 called Jeff's Bistro, modeled after the lemonade stand concept. He initially started it to purchase a \$1,300 black leather chair to make television watching more comfortable. Because of an optic tumor, Jeff's vision had eroded to 20/150 with a sight range of only eight to 10 feet.

At its onset, Jeff's mother, Julie, agreed to provide the bistro with loaves of her famous breads and other goodies to supplement the beverages. Customers could also purchase a six-pack of Jeff's original notecards in addition to a cold drink and delicious pastry.

Three days into the bistro project the coveted chair landed on the Hanson's driveway. An inspired passer-by had stopped, learned Jeff's story and decided the entrepreneur's efforts were worthy of the gift.

According to Julie, Jeff was enjoying the bistro so much he decided to extend its operation and pledged to donate all proceeds to the Children's Tumor Foundation, a New York-based nonprofit organization committed to finding a cure for neurofibromatosis, the rare genetic disorder threatening to rob him of his sight. Jeff's Bistro was tallying daily receipts as high as \$3,000 as people flocked to the stand to meet the young dynamo, munch on Julie's morning breads and donate to the cause.

"At one point, I was churning out 70 loaves of bread a week with only one oven," recalls Julie.

Weeks later Jeff mailed a substantial check to the Children's Tumor Foundation, one of four hand-picked charities that benefit from the sale of his contemporary original artwork.

The year prior to launching Jeff's Bistro, Jeff had endured chemotherapy and radiation to help stabilize his vision.

"His vision has remained constant during the past two years," says Julie. "However, Jeff will probably deal with tumors on different areas of his central nervous system throughout life."

Never prone to self-pity, the ebullient Jeff, a ninth grader at the Kansas State School for the Blind has a unique perspective of his life's purpose.

"I'm in the fast lane on the inspiration interstate," he explains. "I want to do things to help others. I want to give away what I've received."

Jeff has indeed followed his own marching orders. In addition to the Children's Tumor Foundation, the beneficiary of almost \$15,000 since Jeff started his one-kid fundraising efforts, his painted note cards and explosively brilliant acrylic canvases are sold to benefit the Kansas City Blind All Stars Foundation, the Make-A-Wish Foundation and the Elton John AIDS Foundation. Jeff's 2009 art calendar, featuring 12 charities that have touched his life, will be sold online to raise money.

His simple studio is located in the basement of his parents' Overland Park home. Canvases for upcoming auctions, private commissions and other projects are balanced on

top of paint cans. Jeff's paint-spattered smock hangs nearby and bright lights are positioned to help illuminate the workplace.

His parents concede that Jeff's world is quite different from most 14-year-old boys.

"He can't play soccer and other sports," says his father, Hal, an ER physician. "He doesn't see a perfect world—rather, it's hazy. His favorite pastime is to pursue his art."

Then there's the encounter Jeff had with an iconic rock star that has led to a friendship and the merging of two creative spirits. Two years ago when Jeff spent time at Children's Mercy Hospital following his treatments, the Make-A-Wish Foundation told him he qualified for a "wish."

Julie says Jeff didn't skip a beat when he named two people he'd most like to meet.

"Oprah and Elton John," says a misty-eyed Julie. "He knew Elton's music because Hal and I play it constantly. Jeff was also aware of his AIDS work, and that impressed him."

When Elton opened the Kansas City Sprint Center on Oct. 13, 2007, the Hansons were backstage in the green room. Jeff, armed with a \$1,000 check made out to the Elton John AIDS Foundation, intended to present the money—earned from painting canvases—during their private meeting.

"Elton was generous with his time," remembers Julie. "We sat with him and his dog, Sir Arthur, in the green room chatting like old friends. Jeff gave him a package of original notecards and told him about the Children's Tumor Foundation. Time almost stood still."

Elton was visibly moved by the young teen's generosity and philanthropic spirit and told the family they had seats in the brand-spanking-new facility where Jeff could see the show.

During the Sprint Center performance, Elton called out a dedication to Jeff for "I'm Still Standing," the popular song about making a comeback despite problems in daily life.

Since that momentous back stage tête-à-tête, Elton has flown Jeff and his parents to Dubai and Las Vegas for The Red Piano concert at Caesar's Palace and commissioned him to paint a suite of 12 canvases for his much-heralded South Africa Cluster Homes to help pregnant women with AIDS.

And then there's the very special canvas Jeff created for his chart-busting English friend. "View from the 22nd Row" was presented by Jeff to Elton John in Dubai. That piece hangs in Sir Elton John's London office.

Jeff has painted more than 5,000 notecards to date, and he has canvases hanging in church coffee shops, area hospitals and serious art collectors' homes. But most importantly, he continues to touch lives and hearts. So much so that actor/director Harold Ramis learned of Jeff's selfless work and asked him to be an extra in his upcoming Biblical comedy *The Year One*.

For a young man with limited vision, Jeff Hanson certainly sees life's big picture.

For more information on Jeff Hanson and to view his art and causes visit

www.jeffreyowenhanson.com.