

Bursting With Color

By Jeff Hanson

15-Year-Old Jeff Hanson Is Legally Blind, But His Artwork Shows True Vision

My name is Jeffrey Owen Hanson. I'm legally blind—I'm also an artist. I was born with a generic disorder called neurofibromatosis, which can cause tumors on the central nervous system.

I have a glioma (tumor) on my optic nerves. Medical treatment stabilized my vision to 20/150—that means I can read the big "E" on the eye chart with glasses.

I named the tumor "Clod." I'm a funny kid and my tumor was certainly not getting a serious medical name! I wanted to laugh at this tumor, not be afraid of it.

REACHING OUT

I started painting note cards as a fun pastime that I could still do with low vision, while receiving treatments. Art kept me busy. But then came Jeff's Bistro, a glorified lemonade stand in my driveway at home in Overland Park, Kansas. I intended it to be a summer activity to earn money to buy a chair for my bedroom. I sold my hand-painted note cards and Mom's baked goods.

The Bistro quickly became so successful that I decided to give the proceeds to the Children's Tumor Foundation. They needed the money more than I did. That summer, I raised about \$15,000.

I met superstar Elton John through Make-A-Wish, a group that grants wishes to kids. I told him about my charity, and he invited me to create art to decorate Elton John AIDS Foundation's HIV/AIDS homes in South Africa.

Art became something I could do to contribute to an important cause. Everyone, young or old, needs a purpose in life, and that was mine.

A UNIQUE VISION

I see things best in high contrast, and my art reflects this. My visual world has holes punched in it like Swiss cheese. I don't see straight, sharp lines. Things at a distance of 8 to 10 feet are hazy. Because of this, I cannot draw or paint anything concrete. You won't find me at the State Fair sketching caricatures!

My art makes me smile. It sometimes even makes me laugh. It has a "pop!" People tell me I have a gift for putting unusual colors together. The result is an expression of me, and I am a happy, upbeat person.

I'm constantly on the lookout for ideas. But, honestly, all my inspiration comes straight from my heart.

What's my advice for young artists and writers? Just do it! Don't be intimidated because of your age, inexperience, or impairment. Every famous artist had to start sometime.

Keep your eyes open. Art is around us everywhere. You might get an idea from the pattern of shadows on the sidewalk or the arrangement of leaves on a fern.

Most important of all, keep a sense of humor. Don't take yourself or your problem so seriously.

LOOKING AHEAD

I received 28 radiation treatments directed at Clod. My vision is stabilized. Now, I can see well enough to remain independent. I can watch TV and play computer games, as long as I sit close to the screen.

These days, I sell my 2009 Generous HeART calendars and note cards to raise money for 12 charities that have touched my life. I started my own custom canvas business.

I am currently a freshman at the Kansas State School for the Blind. My career will depend upon my uncertain future. I will forever love art. Will it support me in life? Only time will tell. But if not, I will find a way to laugh through adversity, and find my niche.