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DOING A FAVOR FOR ELTON JOHN ... Giving back has always been part of area teen's style

Blind artist a charitable talent

The singer has asked the youth to paint 12 works to brighten homes of AIDS patients in South Africa.

First, Jeff Hanson got to meet Elton John.

Now the Overland park teenager is fulfilling the performer's request for artwork to brighten the lives of AIDS patients in South Africa.

Jeff was born with neurofibromatosis, a genetic condition that causes tumors to grow on nerve tissue. In some cases, the condition can be as harmless as spots on the skin. In Jeff, a low-grade malignant tumor developed on his optic nerve.

Chemotherapy and radiation have kept the tumor the size of a pea, but the 14-year old, who has learning disabilities, is legally blind.

But he also is an artist who uses his work to give back to charities.

At the beginning of the 2005-06 school year, Jeff took a required art class as a sixth-grader at Overland Trail Middle School.

"He loved it and could feel a lot of success in it," said Aimee Price, his art teacher at that time. "With any student, you work at what they can be successful at. ...I wanted to challenge him and get him outside his comfort level."

The following summer, Jeff started painting abstract note cards. He sold more than 5,000 of the hand-painted cards, many from the driveway of his home.

His art is done in colors he can distinguish – bright and bold.

He has small holes in his vision, said his father, Hal Hanson. For example, if Jeff looks at the word "the", he might see only "he." If he shifts his head, he might see "t."

Jeff now is a student at the Kansas State School for the Blind in Kansas City, Kansas. His art business has grown into commissioned requests for the note cards to be transferred onto canvases priced from \$100 to \$1,000.

The Hanson's unfinished basement is his studio. Large white canvases are propped against furniture protected by sheets of heavy plastic. Bookshelves hold tubes and jars of paint.

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And every day, for an hour or so, Jeff paints. His parents help by bringing him paints and cleaning tools, and sometimes by giving direction on the proportions of color to match the work from the original note cards.

Jeff's favorite tools are a miniature paint roller and a large putty knife. He works in acrylics, which dry more quickly than oil. He and his dad create a three-dimensional look by weaving strips of fabric through slits in the canvas. Jeff then paints the knotted fabric.

Jeff always gives back a bit of what he earns. The sale of his cards, along with some of his mother's baked goods, raised more than \$15,000 for the Children's Tumor Foundation. His work has been put into a 2009 calendar, with all proceeds going to 12 charities that have touched Jeff's life.

One night last week, Jeff began working on his largest canvas to date, a 4-foot by 5-foot painting to be donated to an auction gala for Angel Flight Central in November.

Then there was Jeff's first encounter with Elton John.

The October meeting at the opening of the Sprint Center fulfilled Jeff's two-year wait for his request to the Make-A-Wish Foundation. At the meeting, Jeff surprised the performer with a \$1,000 check—from the proceeds of his art sales—to the Elton John AIDS Foundation.

"They struck up a friendship," said Scott Campbell, executive director of the foundation in New York. "He (John) is very interested in the personal stories."

Since then, Jeff and his parents have flown as John's guests to concerts in the United Arab Emirates and in Las Vegas. On the Dubai trip in January, Jeff gave his favorite painting to John. It's called "A View from the 22nd Row," after a line in "Candle in the Wind." The canvas is covered with large blocks of blue, silver, orange, pink, purple and yellow.

"This is how Jeff sees Elton on stage," Hal Hanson said. "He sees the lights."

And in the United Arab Emirates, John asked Jeff a favor. Would he create artwork that could be placed in the AIDS foundation's "cluster homes" in South Africa?

In these homes, said Jeff's mom, Julie, pregnant HIV-positive women receive medicine so their children will be born HIV-free.

"He told Jeff, "I need you to brighten these homes. Would you paint 12 canvases?" Julie Hanson said.

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Campbell said he wasn't sure when Jeff's art would head to South Africa. But through Sunday, the work can be viewed at United Methodist Church of the Resurrection, 13720 Roe Avenue in Leawood.

For more information, go to www.JeffreyOwenHanson.com

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