

Vito's dreams turn into art awards

Published: Monday, October 26, 2009

By Pamela Mcloughlin, Register staff

NEW HAVEN — Vito Bonnano is the kind of artist who has always drawn the places and things that he loves, over and over again.

There is the McDonald's Playland in Milford, characters from South Park, Jim Morrison and The Doors, graffiti that he sees on the highway and traffic lights — lots of traffic lights — because they're "so different," he says.

Bonnano, 26, prefers to create his pieces with "non-dotcom" markers or crayons, meaning the older ones that don't have the company's Web site printed on the side. And as his mom, Cindy, Watson puts it, "there's no piece of paper that's not draw able" — brown restaurant napkins, At-a-glance desk calendars and, at one time, the behavior charts he had in school.

"Art inspires you; it gets the anger out of you," Bonnano said.

He even writes on his arms, but they can't be framed like the rest of his works.

"I call it OCD writing," he said, referring to obsessive compulsive disorder.

Vito is on the autism spectrum and it was once doubtful that he would ever live independently, let alone develop an enviable skill that would win him awards, Watson said.

After graduation from Chapel Haven, Bonnano is not only living on his own with just a few hours of help with bill-paying, but since beginning classes at Creative Arts Workshop, his artistic abilities have soared and landed one of his award-winning pieces in the Smithsonian's Dillon Ripley Center and another at Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, also in Washington, D.C. Bonnano was recently a standout in the VSA arts exhibit for emerging artists with disabilities. Along with national recognition, Bonnano received \$2,000 for the honor. His work has made the rounds locally as well.

"I am extremely proud," Watson said of her son. "I always enjoyed his art, but I thought it was a mother's bias."

Watson said Vito has always been a good person, but had a lot to overcome and never gave up. Watson said she hopes Vito's story will give hope to other parents with special needs children.

"Never set limitations because you never know," Watson said of parenting. "Always

strive for more than you think they can do, because you just don't know."

Bonnano's art teacher at CAW, Liz Pagano, said she loves working with him because he's inquisitive, engaging.

"I think his art is fabulous," Pagano said. "It just flows right out of him. He doesn't censor anything, which gives it a fresh quality."

The VSA arts-winning piece is a monotype and collage that includes images of graffiti and traffic lights. In order to express his preferences in art class, Bonnano will often put his mood into a color, saying he feels "laser lemon" or "spring green," his mom said.

Bonnano began drawing in middle school to illustrate his dreams — a topic he says he became obsessed with — and from there, he blossomed.

He kept his artwork in crayon for many years, then added markers, then paint. Today he uses multi-media.

The images he puts on paper usually reflect something from his everyday life. For instance, when Watson returned from a trip to Italy, she told her son in making conversation that some letters, such as "W," aren't in that country's alphabet. The result was a striking, now professionally framed piece aptly entitled, "W does not exist in the Italian alphabet."

The graffiti he draws is usually something he's seen on a highway underpass, sound barrier or building and it doesn't end for him to just put it on paper; he'll check every time they drive by to see if it's still there.

Bonnano, who has two part-time jobs, including at Edge of the Woods, said he'd love to someday be able to support himself through artwork.

Michael Storz, executive vice president of Chapel Haven, has worked with Bonnano for several years and said his artwork is "beautiful."

"This award is an incredible accomplishment for Vito," Storz said. "Chapel Haven is privileged to be part of his journey in realizing his creative dreams. He has grown into a successful young adult."

To learn more about Bonnano's art or to purchase an item, go to:

www.cafepress.com/vitosworld or visit the family's Ebay store, Justguienterprises.