



The transforming power of art.

A remote-controlled electric plane — it's something every child wants. But for 12-year-old Theo* of Avondale, it's more than an exciting new toy. It's a validation of his years of hard work struggling to overcome the challenges he's faced in his young life.

Theo purchased the plane with money he earned selling one of his paintings at an art fair hosted by Art Awakenings, a local art therapy program. The painting is abstract, with vivid greens, yellows, oranges and splatters of black, all swirling in a frenzy of energy and motion. For Theo's mom, Wendy*, energy and motion are what Theo's all about.

"He's the nonstop kid and that can be hard to deal with," Wendy said. "But when he's on that high that about sends us over the edge, I stop and think about everything he's had to do just to live."

A rough start.

Theo was born prematurely at just 29 weeks, weighing in at about three pounds. By the time he was seven months old, he was in the foster care system. At age five, he was adopted along with his biological brother. Wendy is raising the boys and their two adopted sisters as a very busy single mom.

Theo is smart as a whip, earning straight A's in his sixth-grade classes. But he's behind when it comes to behavior and social skills. "There's some impairment in the executive thinking part of his brain," explained Wendy. "There's not a filter, so no thinking before you speak. He struggles with self-regulation and self-esteem." Over the years, Theo has had speech therapy, occupational therapy and a lot of one-on-one behavioral therapy to try to help him catch up.

Finding a creative outlet.

Last year, Theo had a two-week out-of-home hospitalization placement. "While he was there, he did a beautiful drawing, so we started looking into whether art would be a good way for him to express himself," said Wendy. She talked to Mary Krawczyk, LCSW, Theo's UnitedHealthcare Community Plan CRS case manager, who connected Theo to Art Awakenings.

Wendy saw right away that it was a great fit for Theo. "Art helps him turn his energy into something positive," she said. "Creating art helps him meet his sensory needs. And art helps his thinking and processing skills because it helps him focus and learn to control his impulses."

Art therapy, she said, works for Theo in a way that traditional therapy doesn't. "He doesn't want to talk about his feelings," she explained. "He's a hands-on child who wants to work on something that holds his interest and allows him to express himself."

"Art helps him turn his energy into something positive."
Wendy, mother of Theo,
a UnitedHealthcare
Community Plan
CRS member

Hopes for the future.

Most important, art helps Theo feel good about himself. “He’s a very private person who doesn’t like to be in the public spotlight,” Wendy said. “He was hesitant to do the art show, but we convinced him to go. He ended up engaging in conversations with people about his painting and that was a huge leap for him.”



“The beauty of expressive arts is in their potential for enhancing self-expression, communication skills, cooperation, problem solving and creativity.”¹

Theo was shocked and delighted when his painting sold. “He was one of the youngest artists and it was one of the first artworks to sell,” Wendy said. “It helped him feel better about himself — and he was excited about the money too.”

Theo’s decision to buy the electric plane reflects his biggest interest: mechanics. “He’s constantly making things and taking them apart,” said Wendy. “He makes bows and arrows out of trees. He’d rather take skateboards apart than ride them.” And Theo loves tools. “It’s a little alarming to give a hyperactive kid a saw,” Wendy confessed. “But when you watch him work, you see the wonderful calm that comes over him.”

Wendy thinks she may have a future engineer on her hands. And she credits Mary with helping Theo develop his talents. “Mary and UnitedHealthcare Community Plan CRS have provided me with anything I’ve asked for, helping me understand what services are available so I can advocate for my son,” she said.

Going forward, Wendy hopes to help Theo keep building on the progress he’s made. “He’s my project now, and I want to help him feel happy and successful about himself,” she said. “Through his art, he’s really raising awareness about what he can do in the community.”

*Member names are fictitious to protect the privacy of our members