

Delaware Artist Inspires Creativity One Fish at a Time

If a picture is worth a thousand words, the works of John Donato are conversations that never end. The Sussex County artist discovered his passion for art at a young age. “As early as I can remember, I was a good doodler,” said Donato.

Donato realized those doodles wouldn’t get him very far in the working world, so he pursued graphic design at the University of Maryland. He calls it art with a purpose. Donato would eventually go into marketing and worked for several years in the Washington, D.C., area. It was a marketing job for the Carl M. Freeman Companies that brought him to Delaware. That’s when he revisited art as a hobby.

“My mom saved my doodles, she was really good about saving my doodles,” said Donato. “So I picked up a doodle of a pig and painted it.”

He gave that painting to his mother, who showed it to some of the local artists. All the artists wondered, “Who’s this painter? He has some talent.” In 2008, when the economy started to take a tumble, Donato decided to turn his hobby into a career.

“I had to talk to my wife, had to talk to everybody and really had to ask myself if I could actually make it as an artist, with the reality that this economy is probably the worst time to actually start an art career.”

Then John’s marketing expertise kicked in and he put together a business plan. The first year he participated in 30 shows in the mid-Atlantic region and successfully sold many paintings.

A principal from New Jersey approached and asked him to help students paint a mural about literacy. He says he liked the idea so much that he expanded on it.

“Instead of just coming in and painting a little spot, why not really center it on what these kids are trying to learn?” He came up with a program that engaged the students and encouraged them to read before he even stepped foot in the school.

The program was a huge success, and soon, he was getting phone calls from others in the teaching community. Before long, Donato was traveling around the region helping several other schools paint murals.

The program grew to include tough lessons in subjects like bullying prevention. Donato said, "I was seeing a lot of at-risk children who needed help and some sort of communication or self-awareness or a source of self-expression."

The Rehoboth Art League approached Donato about a mural project for foster children who were aging out of the system. "I really had to start thinking about their challenges and how am I qualified to help?"

So, Donato started attending youth advisory council meetings, which gave him an opportunity to speak with foster children and learn about their specific challenges and how he could help them.

That's how he realized he could help them with a simple fish.

Donato guided children to paint a fish in simple steps with very few rules, which allowed them to tap into their artistic talents. "I keep telling them trust me, I'm here."

Donato shows the children a few simple techniques and he even helps them a little bit. But he says 99 percent of the work is theirs. During the program, the students' confidence level increases.

"By the end of the week, they're really hard-core painters," said Donato. "They're really not afraid, their fear is gone and they're working together."

The artist's formula gently pushes children out of their comfort zone and allows them to open up and express what they're feeling deep inside. Donato is also on a mission to bring art back into the education curriculum, saying children are not getting enough time to exercise the creative right side of the brain.

"You have to engage in both," said Donato. "I think art is creativity and is a very necessary component. My mission is to really prove that."

To learn more about Donato's art programs, please visit www.johndonatoart.com.