



Young man is happy to sell his artwork to buy Broadway show tickets for others who also have developmental disabilities.



Photos by JOHN MART — State Journal

Alex Haunty, 21, who loves Broadway musicals so much that he has a bedroom inspired by the Broadway stage, has made a second passion of sharing that love with others. Using money he earns from the sale of his art, he buys tickets to Broadway shows at the Overture Center for other students with developmental disabilities.

# LIFTING HEARTS BY SHARING HIS JOY

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Alex Haunty's dream is to play the role of the Beast in the Broadway show "Beauty and the Beast."

But for now, he'll settle for bringing beauty to his friends.

For more than two years, Haunty, 21, has raised money through his own artwork to buy tickets for students with disabilities to see Broadway shows at the Overture Center. Despite his own cognitive disabilities, Haunty holds three

jobs, attends a program at Edge-wood College and with the help of family has created his own Alex Haunty Theatre Arts Fund.

"I like to bless people and make them happy," Haunty explained, pointing to the paintings he makes in "whimsical colors" to sell as prints and greeting cards.

"I like them to feel inspired," Haunty said. "That's why my website is 'Inspiring Art by Alex!'"



Paintbrushes and artwork by Alex Haunty in the 21-year-old's studio created for him in his parents' Middleton home.

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Since he was very young, creating art has served as a form of therapy for Haunty, who creates paintings in a studio in his parents' Middleton home and then sells them online and at local art shows.

JOHN HART —  
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## Ticket

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In 2011, Haunty bought tickets for 40 students and caregivers to "Beauty and the Beast" at Overture. Last spring, he hosted 60 for "Mary Poppins." This month, he's invited 36 to "Sister Act."

His generosity has made him a legend in the group sales office at Overture, said group sales manager Heather Harris.

"Alex is a really amazing person," she said. "He has this bright personality and is super-enthusiastic about everything."

When Overture arranged for him to meet the lead actor who played Bert in "Mary Poppins" backstage after the show, "I think Alex inspired the actor more than the other way around," she said.

The arts have always opened paths for Haunty, said his mother, Mary Beth. At age 4, he weighed only 19 pounds and was just starting to learn to walk. He wouldn't begin to talk for several more years. Though he displayed behaviors of the autism spectrum, young Alex never received a specific diagnosis of autism because of his ability to intensely connect with people, his mother

said. His family and his therapists worked around-the-clock to foster his communication skills — and found that creating art was key.

At age 9, Alex began making pottery at Cathy Ostrom's former Middleton studio, The Art Room.

In middle school and high school he branched into theater, joined chorus and sang a senior recital. Ostrom heard that performance and urged Haunty to get back into art.

She lined up his first art show at Middleton's Prairie Café, and Haunty discovered that his paintings could sell.

It was an astonishing feat for Haunty's family, who knew just how far he had come. In his early years, his "severe sensory defensiveness" made sound, touch and light painful.

"His sensory defensiveness made it difficult for him to eat, to walk, to speak," his mother recalled. "He wasn't able to draw a square or a circle at his screening tests when he was young. The idea of him being an artist I would have not imagined at that time."

So when as a teenager he presented her with his first painting, a vibrant yellow floral titled "Flowerworks," "it was like a

window into his feelings," his mother said. "It overwhelmed me with gratefulness and helped me see even more the creativity that was inside my son."

In 2011, Haunty won a cash award from Ziemann Corp. for his involvement with the Best Buddies friendship program at Middleton High School. Best Buddies pairs students with intellectual and developmental disabilities with other students. Haunty spent his award earnings to treat the group to "Beauty and the Beast."

These days he has part-time jobs at a law office, a science firm, and at ArtWorking in Madison, a studio for adult artists with cognitive disabilities. He's enrolled in Cutting Edge, Edgewood's college program for students with intellectual developmental disabilities. And he markets greeting cards and prints with his art online at [inspiringartbyalex.com](http://inspiringartbyalex.com).

Selling art as a "micro-enterprise" is not unusual for ArtWorking artists, said Chris Hindle, an artist mentor at ArtWorking.

"But the level of (Haunty's) philanthropy is pretty unique," Hindle said. "He loves the idea of making the money and turning it around to help others."