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## Mother, son push through barriers of autism to discover artist within

By SALI McSHERRY

Walking through the sunny Cleveland Heights home of Debra Chwast, huge paintings full of light, color and whimsy line the walls of three floors of the home.

Those paintings represent the world of Debra's son, Seth, a 29-year-old man who was diagnosed with severe autism at an early age and today, a man who can't safely cross the street by himself.

There were years of countless therapies and even ballroom dancing, but it wasn't until Seth attended a painting class at the Cleveland Museum of Art where he found his voice at age 20 in 2003. With his innate ability to mix colors, his unique perspective and bold use of color and shape, his vision of his world could be shared with others, Debra Chwast said.

It's a far cry from what a vocational counselor told his mother — Seth wouldn't be able to do much more than janitorial work. If one knows anything about his mother, it's that she is a determined woman. She produced a short documentary "A Different Kind of Journey" which was shown on WVIZ-PBS and later seen by a staff member on the "Today" show.

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With the help of mentors and his mother's dedication to Seth's promise, his art, featuring horses, auroras, whales, roller coasters and self-studies, has traveled the world.

The awards and opportunities keep coming.

His "Mystic Creatures" mural was selected to be represented on a postage stamp in

recognition of World Autism month (April) and issued by the United Nations Postal Administration. Together, the artwork and the artists who designed the stamps are raising awareness about autism. Autism Speaks, a national organization dedicated to raising awareness and funding research into the causes, prevention and treatment of autism, was instrumental in supporting the effort.

Seth and his mother have traveled to Costa Rica, Galapagos and the Cayman Islands, where he had a solo exhibition of his work in 2009. His artwork is constantly changing, depending on the discoveries he makes through his travels. Seth has a collection of hundreds of paintings, some which have been sold all over the world.

He's had solo exhibitions at University Hospitals of Case Western Reserve University and Cleveland Clinic and both institutions have purchased paintings.

Seth also regularly paints in New York with world-renowned artist Kip Jacobs where they create Manhattan cityscapes and mobiles, his mother said.

He also has exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art Ukraine in Kiev, the Dart-

mouth-Hitchcock Medical Center and Curacao. He also has exhibited at the Cleveland Museum of Natural History, most recently with his "Mystic Creatures" which is on display through June 3.

His mother's book, "An Unexpected Life: A Mother and Son's Story of Love, Determination, Autism and Art," is filled with 124 of Seth's paintings and artist statements and he currently is working on a children's book of mythic creatures, according to Mrs. Chwast.

For more information visit [sethchwast-art.com](http://sethchwast-art.com).

### An Unexpected Life



"An Unexpected Life: A Mother and Son's Story of Love, Determination, Autism and Art" was written by Debra Chwast of Cleveland Heights. It contains more than 124 paintings by her son, Seth, an artist whose work has been exhibited all over the world.