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Father and son connect through art

Lonnie Smith and his son Kambel once had a tumultuous relationship.

When Kambel was a boy, Lonnie said, he couldn't understand him very well. Kambel was not speaking clearly, but he was expressing a lot of anger. Kambel had been diagnosed with autism, and Lonnie didn't know how to communicate with him. It was as if there was a wall between them, he said, until Lonnie discovered his son's talent for art—by accident.

In an interview with the *Healthy Trailblazer Journal*, father and son recounted their journey from their difficult relationship to one of mutual understanding.

Years ago, Lonnie noticed that the cover of the heating vent in Kambel's bedroom was tilted. "I



Kambel Smith in his home studio

went to fix it and discovered there were all of these drawings," Lonnie said. They were on crumpled-up papers depicting superheroes and villains. "He had a bunch of enemies. One of the enemies was me. I was his archenemy."

Lonnie found that Kambel's characters seemed to carry the same sadness he saw in his son's eyes. Kambel was expressing his feelings through the drawings in ways that words couldn't say.

"I took the drawings with me to work and wrote stories and brought them home. I started to talk about the stories [with Kambel]," Lonnie said. And the wall between them began to crumble.

An important moment came when Lonnie decided to kill off a

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Kambel Smith: The cardboard genius

Unlike artists who use paper, pencils, paints, or clay, Kambel Smith uses cardboard to make scaled models of famous buildings. He recently told *Healthy Trailblazer Journal* reporters he's inspired by the architecture of historic buildings.

Kambel especially likes to make models of tall buildings, such as the Burj Khalifa, the tallest building in the world, in Du-



Kambel created this sculpture of the Reading Pagoda in Reading, PA.

bai, a country in the Middle East. He said the Burj Khalifa is one of his favorite sculptures. It also took the longest time for him to create.

Today, his cardboard creations can sell for thousands of dollars. News media feature his work. He has exhibited his buildings at the Philadelphia Interna-

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Connecting with art

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character, a car, in one of the stories. He said that Kambel, who had not been speaking clearly until that point, protested, “Why do we gotta kill the car?” I told him if you want the car to live, you have to come up with another way.”

By the next day, Kambel had new drawings, Lonnie said, and the drawings changed their relationship and helped bring them closer as father and son. In addition, with Lonnie’s stories and support, Kambel was beginning to explore his artistic talents.

Without training, Kambel moved from drawing to painting on canvas to creating architectural models using cardboard, foam board, glue and paint. He builds these pieces to scale—meaning the proportions match those of the original building—and he does it freehand, without measuring tools, relying entirely on his natural spatial sense and vision.

These abilities make Kambel what the Smith family calls an “autisarian,” which is a “person born with superhuman abilities due to the condition called autism.” That’s the definition on the website they’ve created, autisarian.com.

Today, Kambel is an adult, and he and Lonnie continue to work together.

Kambel said his dad went from being a villain in his drawings to being his biggest motivator. “My fa-



Kambel’s sculpture of Milwaukee City Hall highlights the building’s historic architectural features with fine details.

ther reminds me I’m a cardboard genius,” Kambel said.

—By *Healthy Trailblazer Journal* staff

Kambel exhibits artwork near and far

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tional Airport, the Germantown Historical Society, a gallery in Atlanta, Georgia, and more.

Kambel works from morning until night with cardboard he gets from old boxes and from his neighbors, only stopping for food when his father, Lonnie, reminds him he needs to eat.

When Kambel began making the sculptures, the family lived in Philadelphia’s Germantown neighborhood. But as he continued to build more and more of them, they took up too much space, his father said. The Smiths recently moved to Reading in Berks County so they could have more space to store cardboard and artwork, Lonnie said.

His father said Kambel has worked around challenges related to his autism diagnosis to create all of his works. Originally, he made paintings on canvas, until the canvas became too expensive. Then, after looking around the neighborhood for other materials



Kambel’s sculpture of the Golden Nugget Hotel and Casino is displayed outside his home studio. The art piece features intricate design elements.

to use, he tried to paint on cardboard. But there the paint would fade too quickly, so he decided to build with the cardboard instead, according to Lonnie. If a sculpture gets damaged, he doesn’t get upset. “He enjoys fixing it,” Lonnie said.

—By *Healthy Trailblazer Journal* staff

Reporters describe Kambel's impact

The interview inspired me because now I think everyone has a power. The human spirit is very creative.

—Dallas Marshall

The interview changed how I think about people: All people are different. The human spirit is indomitable.

—Xavier Whittington

The interview really inspired me because it made me realize it's OK to do more art on my own and to be who I want to be as a person.

—Ayane Douglas



Illustration by Healthy Trailblazer Journal reporter

Cub Corner

Review: So many vegetables to eat

The Vegetables We Eat

By Gail Gibbons

The Vegetables We Eat teaches about the different kinds of vegetables we eat. Vegetables are healthy for our bodies and a vegetable is the part of a plant you eat.

For example, broccoli is the flower of a plant, beans are a seed, lettuce is a leaf, radishes are a root, and celery is a stalk.



Kindergarten reporters in Ms. Kanopka's class

recommend this book for a variety of readers. Teachers could use this book to teach students all about vegetables. Parents could use this book to show their kids what vegetables they eat. Even if

you can't read yet, the pictures can teach you a lot about vegetables, so this book is great for students in any grade.

All of the students enjoyed this book because it showed so many colorful vegetables and taught them about the parts of the plants that we eat.

DePaul Healthy Trailblazer Journal

A publication of The DePaul Catholic School, an Independence Mission School in Philadelphia. Eighth-grade reporters include Sebastian Agum, Jerrell Burgess, Arielle Burgess, James Conley, Dwaine Cooksey, Ayane Douglas, Jaylaa Ellis, Chase Gresham, Bazir Harper, Lily Jones, Dallas Marshall, Xavier Whittington, and Peyton Young.

The newspaper's faculty advisor is Mr. Leonard. DePaul's school principal is Ms. McKenzie.

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Cub Corner

Book teaches kids about friendship

The Invisible Boy

Written by Trudy Ludwig

Illustrated by Patrice Barton

This is a story about a boy named Brian. He feels invisible in his class because he has no friends and feels left out.

When a new student, Justin, comes to school, Brian welcomes him even though the other students are not kind to him.

When the class starts a new project, Justin invites Brian to be in his group. By the end of the story, Brian starts to see how friendship helps him feel less invisible.

Most of the Cub reporters in Ms. Meaney's first-grade class liked the story, even though it made them sad to see how lonely Brian felt.

One student said they liked the story because it's about making friends and how they keep you from feeling lonely.

Another student said the story was sad, so they didn't like it as much, even though it had a happy ending.

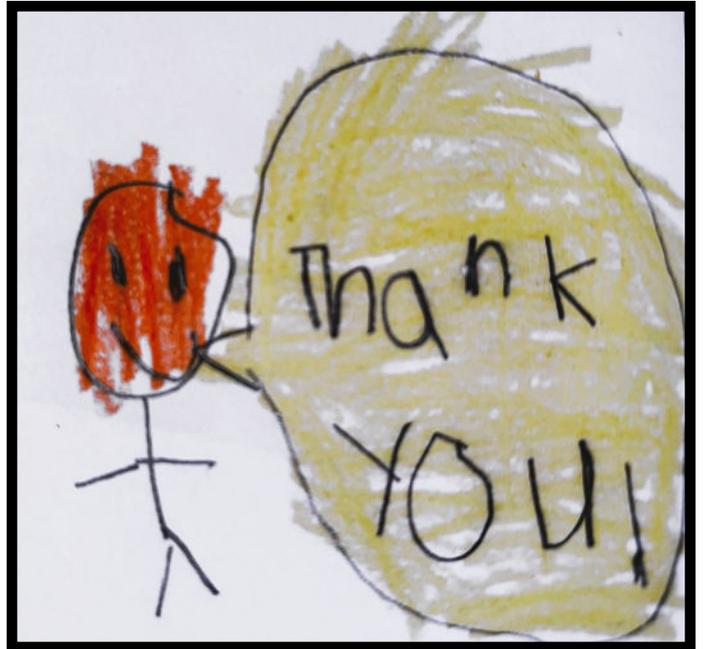


Illustration by a first-grade Cub Reporter in Ms. Meaney's class

They recommend this book to kids in first through fourth grades because younger children might not understand what it means to feel invisible.

Friendship is a skill you can practice

Friendship can help keep you healthy, kindergarten reporters in Ms. Kanopka's class recently learned.

Friends can help you make good choices, practice social skills, feel better about yourself, and reduce stress, say experts at the Mayo Clinic, a hospital and research organization.

Four tips that can help you make a new friend include:

1. Say "Hello!"
2. Be polite.
3. Be kind.
4. Share