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# Stamp artist with cerebral palsy is draw at Livonia festival

BY TAMMY STABLES BATTAGLIA • FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER • JUNE 15, 2008

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What's this?

One artist always sells out at Livonia's Art from the Heart festival, which wraps up today.

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He's George Burnes, a 42-year-old who communicates mostly through smiles and his rubber stamp business.

And with every ladybug, music note, flower and other design he carefully imprints on cardstock with ink, he leaves a mark of independence for people with cerebral palsy like himself, and others with developmental disabilities.

"I think it's pretty amazing, what he does," said Dan Spurling, 53, the Livonia Arts Commission vice chairman and the festival's cochair. "You have a lot of other people who say they're independent artists. And then you look: They have a pole barn and 10 people assembling things. He's a one-man show ... very impressive, especially considering this is his livelihood."

People will be searching for Burnes among Art from the Heart's 75 artists and 10 community group booths, Spurling said. In the show's 33 years, artists typically do well, but few compete with Burnes in sales, he said.

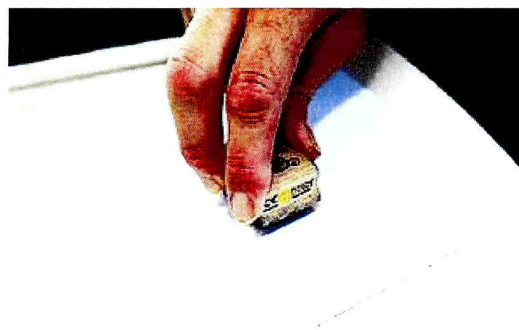
"We have some vendors that actually sell out certain products," Spurling said.



George Burnes makes rubber-stamped cards at the Comprehensive Services for Developmentally Disabled facility in New Haven. With him is his foster mom, Carmen Fisher. Burnes sells his cards at Livonia's

Art from the Heart show.

(Photos by LINDA RADIN/Special to the Free Press)



Burnes' cards usually sell out each year at the Livonia festival. Last year, he sold 60 boxes plus his bookmarks, gift tags, frames and candles.

"His stand out, definitely."

Admission is free to the festival and it runs from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. today on the grounds of the Livonia City Hall, at the corner of 5 Mile and Farmington roads.

## Microenterprise

As Burnes works, his striving for perfection is evident as he sets up his cards in front of him. There's a determined rocking of the wooden stamp in ink. Then he pauses, oh so patiently, holding the stamp above the paper, centering the design. Then, thud. With a couple of wiggles, he's done. And he grins.

Carmen Fisher, 66, of Clinton Township can understand Burnes' every smile, every grunt and every meaningful word camouflaged by her son's disability.

She's determined to create a fulfilling life for the man she took in as a foster child when he was 6 months old. The other 150 children she and her husband, Albert Fisher, 69, fostered during 19 years living in Redford Township are grown and gone, as are their two biological children.

So now she and Burnes, who both moved with Albert Fisher last year to Clinton Township, focus on Burnes' business. Everyone knows Burnes as George -- his business cards say "Creations by George."

Fisher and Burnes hoped to have at least 100 boxes of cards for the Art from the Heart festival; the boxes sell eight for \$8, she said. Last year at that festival, they sold 60 boxes plus bookmarkers, gift tags, frames and candles that Burnes decorates with his stamps.

"To him, if he makes \$5, he'd be happy," his foster mom said, explaining that Burnes breaks even after paying for supplies and entry fees for the 15 or 20 shows he does a year. "But the thing of it is, he works so hard to make this happen with this business. He's just so proud of himself. I just love the opportunity to get him out there and for people to see clients like him, what they can do."

That's the premise behind microenterprise, a relatively new focus in the mental health system, said Jim Grice, who's been in the field for 33 years. He is president and CEO of Services to Enhance Potential, or STEP, the program that spawned Burnes' business. At seven locations in Wayne and Washtenaw counties that provide vocational programs for 3,000 people annually, STEP has been a pioneer in the development of micro-businesses.

STEP was awarded a \$226,000 grant last month from the Detroit-Wayne County Community Mental Health Agency to expand the growth of businesses owned and operated by people with developmental disabilities, Grice said.

"It's really exciting because we're going to be opening a center for entrepreneurial development," he said.

The new facility, slated to open after the grant starts in October, will be located in Detroit. Also included will be a Mobile Education Center: a van with a PowerPoint presentation and a couple of micro-business owners who will visit



Photos by LINDA RADIN/Special to the Free Press

STEP (Services to Enhance Potential) -- the program that helped Burnes start Creations by George -- is a pioneer in the development of micro-business; the program works to expand the growth of businesses owned and operated by people with developmental disabilities.



Burnes, whose cards say "Creations by George," breaks even after paying for supplies and entry fees for the 15-20 shows he does a year.

### STEP UP AND HELP

Despite their businesses, many of the clients at mental health agencies can't afford recreational opportunities, like attending a sporting event or seeing a show, Carmen Fisher said. So ticket donations would be appreciated. To make a donation or for more information on STEP or the micro-business program, call 313-278-3040 or visit [www.stepcentral.org](http://www.stepcentral.org).

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libraries, community centers and other organizations to do presentations on microenterprise and employing people with disabilities.

"The big step is to have people become aware of the possibilities," said Grice, who lives in Canton. "It's a reach-out process. The concept of microenterprise and self-employment is fairly new in this area."

## A STEP in the right direction

People like Burnes typically get direction through their local school system until age 18. Then their opportunities typically come through organizations like STEP.

Five days a week, a bus picks Burnes up from home. When he and his family lived in Redford Township, he would spend the day at STEP's Livonia branch, either working on his business or participating in other vocational skills. Now, he works out of the Comprehensive Services for Developmentally Disabled, the Macomb County program in New Haven, closest to his new home.

Some days, he clips coupons, plans menus and cooks a meal with aides there. On Tuesdays, he helps deliver Meals on Wheels. Three days a week, he works on his microenterprise.

"Nationally, we know that people with disabilities are among the poorest in society," Grice said. "Traditionally, those with disabilities have not been afforded as many employment opportunities. Society is gradually changing that."

Historically, clients at the centers might do piecework for pennies. That still happens. The difference with microenterprise is that each client creates a business, like those run by 87 people through STEP, Grice said. There's everything from vending machine routes to crafts, like the business Burnes started about six years ago.

STEP offers no-interest loans, even as small as \$100, for clients' start-up costs and supplies.

"It's very much an individual process to work with people," Grice said. "It's a big step for any of us to start their own business. You've got to come up with a good business idea, and you also have to have a business plan."

Burnes' plan: To keep spreading the message, one stamp at a time, his mom said.

"When we go to Arts from the Heart craft show and people come up to his table and I start explaining, 'This is George, and George makes all this; each card is made individually, each is made by hand,' they can't believe it," Carmen Fisher said. "They're amazed."

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