

One step at a time

With a quick dip in the paint and a swift stroke of the brush on the canvas, junior Hannah Bergwell creates the paintings and personalized shoes that have gained her attention from many students in the school. From vintage florals to the Beatles, Bergwell has painted them all, impressing anyone who comes across her pictures on Facebook.

Art has always played a prominent role in Bergwell's life. Growing up, her mom and older sister encouraged her to take up painting and helped her perfect her skills in a fun environment.

"My older sister was really good at art," Bergwell said. "My little sister and I used to compete to see who could get the most attention from her art-wise. We used to draw pictures and paint for her to see whose artwork she liked the most."

From a young age, Bergwell has had a knack for creativity and painting. Now, she's taking her art beyond an amateur hobby.

Art in action

As you walk through the hallways, you'll see more and more people sporting shoes adorned with their favorite singer or designs. Painted with intricate details and bright colors by Bergwell, these shoes are a popular new purchase for many.

"I'd seen pictures of painted shoes a lot on photo websites that I like, such as Tumblr, but it really started when my

friend Rachel came to me with some old Sperrys and asked me to do something creative with them. From there, I kind of just winged it," Bergwell said.

In order to design a pair of white canvas shoes, Bergwell needs a special set of equipment and a chunk of time to devote to the work.

"For the shoes I use acrylic paint.

With the acrylic, I mix it with a special medium that makes it good for fabric and so that I'm not spending a ton of money buying more paint," Bergwell said. "Then, once I have everything, a pair takes around two to four hours to finish."

Despite the time commitment, Bergwell finds her shoe business to be an enjoyable pastime through which she gets to express herself and get away from her busy school and soccer schedule. For her, each design provides a new challenge that she can't wait to begin.

"The shoes allow me to get the student body involved in what I'm doing and to be aware of my art. They also give me the opportunity to have a creative outlet since I'm too busy to take art classes," Bergwell said.

"I really like getting to do the tribal print design on the shoes because they're all different, and I get to be really creative with each one. All the

shoes I design are unique to the person, which really helps to show that person's personality," Bergwell said.

Other than her shoes, Bergwell also spends time creating paintings. Her main subjects for her paintings are people portrayed in a somewhat abstract way, with an expressive use of colors.

"Besides the shoes, I do a lot of paintings where I like to experiment with many colors and materials. Sometimes I'll have people commission me to do other things, such as making a

painting for their family, and I've had some people ask to buy paintings I've posted pictures of on Facebook," Bergwell said.

Though many pictures of Bergwell's artwork can be found on her Facebook page, she plans to display her art, and the art of others, to the student body, giving them a chance to see it and even buy it.

"With all the money I receive from the shoes, I'm going to host an art show sometime in October after the PSAT," Bergwell said. "I want to get friends that are also artists and students from art classes to contribute their pieces as well, so that there's more diversity in what is at the show."

To her parents, Bergwell has always been ambitious with her goals and what she wants to do. For every one of her efforts, her parents support her whole-

heartedly and do what they can to help her achieve what she wants to.

"When she talked to us about her plan, we [my wife and I] were supportive and provided some ideas about how to organize and start such a project. We provided some initial supplies for her to start off with, and we set up a space for her to use for her painting in the basement," Bergwell's father John Bergwell said. "We believe she embodies the saying, 'If it's worth doing, it's worth doing well.'"

Her plans for the show are not quite set in stone, but she has an idea as to how she wants the event to turn out so as to make the art as enjoyable for everyone else as it is for her.

"There will be around 40-60 pieces that will be sold during a silent auction. I was hoping to do it at the school, that way a lot more people will turn up," Bergwell said. "I'm also hoping local food vendors can donate food so as to create a nice environment at the show, but for now it's all a work in progress."

Her motivation

Although Bergwell started painting as just a hobby, when people became interested in her shoes and she began to charge money for them, she decided to use the art to do something more.

"All of the money raised at my art show will go to an autism charity called Autism Speaks, which works to raise awareness for and research autism," Bergwell said.

Junior sells custom shoes to support autism research



Junior Hannah Bergwell immerses herself in one of her many wearable creations, the proceeds from which go to the charity Autism Speaks. photo by Erica Emert

Autism Speaks is a charity that's meaningful to Bergwell, whose older brother has autism.

"My brother went to school here and then transferred to Olathe North. Blue Valley North is no doubt a very open and accepting environment, but many people here didn't understand what was wrong with him. I just want them to understand what autism is," Bergwell said.

After her brother moved out at 18, Bergwell was looking for ways to continue to keep people aware of her

brother's disability, which is how she got the idea to donate her art show earnings to Autism Speaks.

"Basically, the whole donation thing started when I used to paint while my brother was playing Wii and video games, and we would just hang out all the time. Now he lives in a residential home because he's 18 and more independent, so I don't see him as much. I'm trying to continue to spread awareness since he's not around," Bergwell said.

Bergwell has always had a close

relationship with her brother. As acknowledged by her parents, she is always right there for him when he needs it.

"He [Hannah's brother] has Asperger's Syndrome, in addition to some other challenges. He is a year and half older than Hannah, but she has always been his 'wingman'. She watched his back. She protected him. She was never far away, but also tried to give him his own space," John Bergwell said.

Along with Bergwell's donations to Autism Speaks and aid to her brother, she also works with students at North with autism every week, leading arts and crafts activities for them in her art club.

"Over the summer I did an art club with some of the navigator students and some of the art I did with them will also be for sale at the show," Bergwell said. "I'm continuing the club during the school year on Thursdays in the morning. At the club, I think of some interactive, easy to do projects to do with the kids. We've done watercolors, blow drying crayons, and I have some other really fun ideas in mind."

Bergwell's art club is sponsored by special education teacher Kristin Herscheberger who finds Hannah's involvement a great contribution. Students of the class find it to be very fun, as does Herschberger who believes it a good way to get them involved.

"Hannah has been a peer for my students in the capacity for three years

now. She understands their disabilities, but doesn't dwell on them and instead focuses on their strengths and finds ways to get them involved as equals," Herschberger said.

In the future

If you find yourself fancying a pair of Bergwell's painted shoes, she is planning on keeping the business going.

"I enjoy doing the shoes, so I'll probably continue to do them this school year if people still want them," Bergwell said.

As for whether or not Bergwell would be interested in pursuing art as a real profession, she is still unsure, as she considers the ups and downs of an art career.

"I'm not quite sure yet if I want to go into art after high school. I might just keep it as a hobby. I know that the art industry is really hard to get into, especially if you're new, and I don't want to be homeless at 20," Bergwell said.

Keep your eyes peeled for more from Bergwell and her future art endeavors, including her art show set to take place near the end of October.

"We hope that everyone will support the art show this year, and that it can grow into something that has a life of its own and that is constantly looking for ways to be ever more inclusive of the special needs population as it continues to be a part of the BVN culture," John Bergwell said.

Hayley Berger
• Staff Mentor

