

## Every Child Should Have an Opportunity to Learn

### Excerpts from *Common Threads: Celebrating Life with Down Syndrome*

"I see a child who places her love and concern for a fellow human over her fear of rejection and hurt. I see a child without judgment or prejudice. I see a child who places others before self. I see a child who perseveres. I see a child with courage. I see a child willing to take a risk to love. I see a hero. I see my daughter."

- Kelly Watkins, mother of Katherine Lowe Watkins  
a 6-year-old with Down syndrome from Paducah, Kentucky

### *The New Van Gogh*

Since members of the U.S. Congress launched their annual high school art competition in 1982, more than 650,000 students have tried to compete for this national exhibition. Within the 10th Congressional District of Ohio, nearly 400 students submitted artwork to Representative Dennis Kucinich for the spring 2000 contest. Imagine a student's thrill after being selected among so many entrants! But Dennis Kucinich's 2000 awards ceremony proved a unique thrill. When contest judges announced that the first place painting belonged to Doug Forster, everyone was somewhat surprised to see a 16-year-old freshman with Down syndrome walk up to the podium to claim the prize. Even his own mother was stunned. Doug expressed little interest in art at home.

So where did he develop such talent? "Doug has such a wonderful teacher," his mother said. For five days each week, Doug created art for 47 minutes each day in art class. It was here that he developed a passion for Vincent Van Gogh. "I don't water the material down, and I don't change the vocabulary," said Doug's art teacher, Jerry Devis.

When the time came for a lesson on color and expression, it seemed only appropriate to begin with an introduction of Van Gogh. "I showed a videotape of Van Gogh's life," said Doug's teacher. Then, he showed one of Van Gogh's sunflower paintings; and afterwards, he brought in some dried sunflowers for the students to observe. For Doug, this lesson was inspiring, and he has since imitated the artist's style in his own portfolio. For the Congressional art competition Doug created his own sunflower painting. In an 18- by 24-inch montage of mixed media, three overlapping sunflowers shimmered in shades of gold and yellow-orange at the eye level of the observer. Doug began by pasting warm shades of colored tissue paper on brown wrapping paper. Using tempera paint, he added the petals. Using actual leaves collected around the school, he imprinted foliage along the base of the painting. Finally, Doug outlined his sunflowers in greater detail using various colors of oil pastels. "It was a brilliant interpretation of a brilliant season," said his teacher.

In preparation for a field trip to NASA, Doug created a celestial interpretation of the Sun, Mars and other planets after seeing a copy of Van Gogh's 1889 *Starry Night*. By year's end, he had assembled a portfolio of about 25 works. According to Doug's art teacher, bringing home the portfolios at the end of the year is like bringing home a collection of emotion, hard work and pride. After the Congressional awards ceremony, both Doug and his painting went on tour. Doug's parents took him to the Detroit Institute of Arts to see a Van Gogh exhibit, and his painting went to various malls and exhibits to be displayed. "Every child should have a chance to express their ideas," said Doug's art teacher.