



(Reprint from the Rocky Mountain News, article by Gary Massaro, Friday, March 26, 2004)

Johnny Santos is the kid you wanted to throttle when you saw spray paint scribbled on a wall in your neighborhood.

But if he continues his present course, you might want to buy his artwork someday.

Santos, 21, has graduated from graffiti to graphic arts. He's studying it at Trinidad State Junior College.

He credits Denver's Arts Street program and its counselors with giving him encouragement to develop his skills.

"It showed me a new way," he said. "When I started, I didn't even know how to turn on a computer."

He worked as an Arts Street intern on projects ranging from designing Web sites to stage backdrops. The program, part of the Mayor's Office of Workforce Development, is funded by private grants, including one from the Fortune Foundation.

Santos was with the program for four years. He now wants to be a computer animator.

"If I didn't go to Arts Street, I would have looked for a job in construction or Hobby Lobby, anything to pay for my supplies," he said. "It's an addiction. When people are done eating, they smoke a cigarette. Me? I have my marker. I have to draw something. It's something I have to do. Some people have a cup of coffee in the morning. I have to draw something."

In Trinidad, Santos paints on computer and canvas.

"I use markers, spray paint, acrylics, a paintbrush," he said. "I don't like to leave anything out. I've even used white-out."

Santos said he didn't get a lot of encouragement from his parents at first.

"My dad told me once that drawings were never going to give you a future," Santos said.

When he received his first paycheck, Santos showed it to his dad, and his dad came around.

"Now, he has faith in me," Santos said. "He told me, 'Keep it going. Don't stop. Don't look back. I want you to have something I didn't have when I was young.'"

Santos will be studying Saturday instead of coming to the benefit, but he said the program that gave him a heads-up can jump-start others.

"If there isn't an Arts Street, these kids are going to be doing some other stuff out there," Santos said. "It's an umbilical cord. It's life to these kids. When Arts Street comes around, they find talent that they have, or they find talent they didn't know they had."

Walls still attract Santos. And he'd still like to paint on them.

But only "if I get permission," he said. "I don't want to get in trouble with the law."