



With his feet, Navajo youngster Dustin Rockmen creates distinctive art  
 Text by LEO W. BANKS Photographs by DON B. STEVENSON

# a boy's gift

**d**ustin roy rockmen lives below a tall bluff where eagles nest. He often sees the great birds soaring above his home at Hunters Point, south of Window Rock on the Navajo Indian Reservation, and he studies them, letting their size and majesty swell his imagination. Then he paints them.

It's what artists do, even sixth graders. They paint the world revealed to them, and for Dustin that means the community's hogans, his aunt's sheep, the red mesas that fill the horizon.

Right now, with fat clouds overhead and rain beginning to fall, Dustin seeks shelter inside the Rockmen family home. He clears a space on the dirt floor for his paper and pencils. His subject this day has nothing to do with his surroundings.

I've asked him to sketch my portrait. "You have to make me look handsome," I say, adding a wisecrack about the enormity of the task.

Dustin's face sparkles and he breaks into a wide, dimpled grin. He turns toward his mom, Linda. "I know, I'll make him a horse,"



he says. "Maybe I'll give him a tail, too."

"Oh, Dusty," she says, covering her eyes.

Everyone laughs, and this remarkable 12-year-old boy, the most talked-about artist on the reservation, an award-winning painter prevented by a disability from using his hands, gets down to work.

At 18 months old, Dustin suffered a rare spinal-cord stroke caused by restricted blood flow due to swelling. Reservation doctors arranged to airlift him to St. Joseph's Hospital in Phoenix.

Linda Rockmen remembers those first terrible hours, watching her stricken son lying motionless in bed, his survival doubtful. Relatives of his Apache father, Jerome, born in Whiteriver on the White Mountain Apache Reservation, rushed to the Valley to donate their blood.

"That whole first day afterward, he didn't move," says Linda.

On the second day, Dustin stirred, and

the Rockmens had hope that their boy would pull through. But they got bad news, too. Doctors said he would no longer have use of his arms.

Now they droop from his shoulders, crooked at the elbows. His wrists angle sideways, and he can't manipulate his fingers to grab things.

But the stroke left intact something that doctors and medical tests can't measure—Dustin's extraordinary spirit and ability to overcome challenges, a grit that sometimes finds its way into the human heart.

Within three days, he began using his feet. Doctors put toys on his hospital bed,



and he'd play with them using his toes.

Later, Linda spent eight months with Dustin at a rehabilitation facility in Tucson. She keeps pictures of that stay in a notebook.

One shows Dustin, then almost 2 years old, in a wheelchair. He could gain speed only by kicking his feet, but zipping down the corridor he'd go, roaring along in his tiny wheelchair, nurses laughing and running after him—a toddler bringing joy to a difficult time.

"I don't know about that boy of mine, but he's always been that way," says Linda.

As time wore on, he got better and better at working his toes like fingers, and today he uses them to draw.

The rain has brought Dustin's younger siblings in from the front yard, too. The 5-year-old twins, Kenzie and Edith, bound crazily about the cramped room.

Dustin is sitting beside the kitchen table. His drawing paper rests on a board that lies flat on the dirt at his feet. He is gripping his pencil between the first two toes of his right foot and deftly steering it across the paper.

Shoulders hunched, face scrunched in

[Opposite page] Hugged by his sister Kenzie, Dustin Rockmen sits in the doorway of a hogan under construction near his home on the Navajo Indian Reservation in northeastern Arizona, surrounded by some of his other siblings (clockwise from bottom left): Justin, Rochelle, Junior and Edith. [left] Dustin demonstrates his technique for drawing by holding a pencil between his toes. Dustin creates art with a personal style, such as the sunflower (far left) and the cowboy (below) on display at the Perry Null Trading Co. in Gallup, New Mexico. paintings courtesy of perry null trading co.



concentration, he works slowly and calmly amid the chaos of Kenzie and Edith's playing and squealing.

"Oops," he says. "I made a mistake. Better fix that."

Dustin — sometimes known by his family nickname "Taazhi," Navajo for turkey — sweeps his eraser off the table with his bent right arm, snatches it with his feet and maneuvers it between the toes of his right foot to rub away his error. He shows amazing dexterity.

"I like my new socks, Mama," he says. "My toes are nice and warm."

Linda made a special trip to the Wal-Mart in Gallup to buy him socks with individual toes. Without them, his feet get too cold to draw during the winter.

For the Rockmens, buying much of anything has been tough. Jerome, 45, suffered a stroke within months of his son's, and later had a heart attack.

He needs oxygen to sleep at night, and on doctor's order cannot work. The family gets by on Social Security disability. But it doesn't go far.

Jerome has just left in their pickup truck to pawn Linda's turquoise cluster bracelet. It usually brings \$30, enough for tomorrow's laundry and some food. When their next check comes, she'll buy it back.

Dustin's art has brought some money to the family — usually \$50 to \$100 for paintings sold here and there — and his renown is growing.

Indian Health Service officials in Kayenta recently asked him to paint a Monument Valley scene for use on T-shirts and mugs. He'll earn \$50 for that piece.

Dustin scored big at last year's art competition at the Navajo Nation Fair. Against 75 other entries, he won best of show, best of class and a first-place ribbon, along with \$500 in prize money.

Linda makes sure that any money her boy makes returns to him to pay for clothes and necessities.

But this time, even though Dustin's arms prevented him from going on the ride at the fair, he insisted that a portion of his prize money go to buy tickets so his brothers and sisters could ride.

Dustin spent much of his childhood until age 5 wearing a helmet because he couldn't balance himself, making falls troublesome, and he has undergone two arm surgeries.

"At first I said no more operations," says Linda. "We were afraid we might not bring him home." But doctors believed they could help him.

Unsure whether to proceed, Linda visited

Richard Charles, her grandfather who lives near Window Rock, and asked him to perform a Native American Church ceremony for Dustin. The all-night service, which involves consuming a drink laced with the hallucinogen peyote, took place inside a teepee that Charles had built outside the Rockmen home.

After all the prayers were said, Jerome



[above] Eager to encourage Dustin, Perry Null purchased this painting, in which the young artist captured the joy of eating watermelon. Perry Null [opposite page, above] Just as Window Rock, a Navajo Nation scenic landmark, offers sky vistas through a sandstone arch, Dustin's artwork presents unique views of his world. [opposite page, below] During their visit, Dustin sketched *The Handsome Horse Man*, a whimsical portrait of author Leo W. Banks.

and Linda still weren't sure what to do. Then she watched Charles taking down the teepee poles, and to her amazement she saw then-4-year-old Dustin helping.

Charles had strapped the rope between the boy's fingers and told him to walk backward to unravel it, praying as he walked. When Linda saw that, she and Jerome agreed to let the surgeons proceed.

"I witnessed a miracle that day," Linda remembers. "Dusty had never used his hands before. Right then I knew he'd use them again."

The prayer meeting stood out for Dustin, too. The first paintings he ever sold — at the Navajo Nation Fair in 1998 — depicted that same Native American Church teepee next to his hogan at Hunter's Point.

The surgeries haven't helped Dustin's left arm but have given him some use of his right arm. He can grip a fork between his forefinger and middle finger to feed himself, and at

the Tse Ho Tso School in Fort Defiance, he uses his pinky to tap the computer keyboard.

To accomplish other tasks, such as pulling a T-shirt over his head, he needs help. But those around him marvel at his determination.

On a school trip last fall, he won a silver medal in a Special Olympics swim meet in Phoenix. He wore a life jacket and floated on his back, propelling himself with his legs.

"He's a normal little boy who wants to be like the other kids," says Arletta Hartmann, Dustin's former preschool teacher who still mentors him. "The only magic about him is what he does with his feet."

Hartmann has taken Dustin under her wing, enrolling him in art classes, and twice a month she takes him to her house for a meal and quiet time to paint.

They have a special relationship. He calls her Grandma. "Dusty was the bright spark in my class," Hartmann says.

Sometimes the two drive to Gallup and visit galleries and trading posts along Route 66. Every new shape and color he sees sends a spark through his imagination. "I like the designs on the big pottery," he says.

Hartmann also brought him to the attention of Art of the People, a collective of top Indian artists formed to promote the arts in the Four Corners region. In December its members take part in a student competition at the Gallup Cultural Center, sponsored by the Southwest Indian Foundation.

Two years ago, Hartmann entered one of Dustin's paintings in the foundation's second show. Well-known Navajo painter Irving Toddy, a founder of Art of the People, served as a judge, and remembers Dustin's watercolor landscape as an outstanding example of craftsmanship and coordination of colors. He called it delicately and professionally done.

Toddy looked forward to meeting Dustin at the awards ceremony to ask how he pulled off such a fine painting.

"Then he walked in, and I saw he could not use his arms," says Toddy. "I was totally overwhelmed that he could execute that way with his feet. He's an amazing young man."

Dustin won first place for that watercolor of a sunset, along with a \$2,500 scholarship. He won first place again the following year for his painting of a horse.

After meeting him, Toddy and other Art of the People members took Dustin into their group. Several continue to meet him in mentoring sessions, including the noted painter Baje Whitethorn.

"His style is fresh and very simple," says Whitethorn. "I keep telling him simplicity is beautiful, and that's what he's going for. He'll



develop because he has the drive and knows what he wants. His palette is wide open."

Wood sculptor Dan Yazzie finds it amazing that high-caliber artists give their time to help Dustin. Talent plays a part, he says, but the sparkle of Dustin's personality factors in, too.

"If I had a grin like his every day of my life, I wouldn't have a thing to worry about," says Yazzie. "Then I watch him work and it makes me want to get down on my knees and pray. It reminds me that there's a higher spirit watching over us. I get chills up and down my spine thinking about it."

the rain is falling harder now, and a cold wind blows off the mesas. Daylight will soon be gone, leaving Dustin to work by butane lamp. Financial troubles have left the Rockmens with no electricity or heat. They

truck drinking water home in barrels from Blue Canyon, a 28-mile round trip.

But Dustin is nearing the end of his portrait. His foot has cramped, which happens sometimes. He often listens to country music to soothe his mind as he draws. He loves Johnny Cash, and don't get him started on George Strait.

"I love it when George Strait sings, 'where the sidewalk ends and the road begins,'" Dustin says. "Do you know that song? I really like that one. I sing along."

He's finished now and proceeds to sign his work. He steadies the eraser end of the pencil between his chin and neck, and guides the point with his right hand, which he lays flat behind the pencil.

Dustin signs his name that way around strangers because he's bashful about taking

off his socks. The signature takes 10 minutes. The letters emerge beautifully formed.

In the sketch, he has portrayed me with the head of a horse and the body of a human. I love it.

"But we need a title," I say. "What'll we call it?"

"*The Horse Man*," he says. After pondering that, he smiles, his face all teeth and dimples, and adds, "Wait, let's call it *The Handsome Horse Man*."

The sketch goes aloft for everyone to see, and we all laugh from our bellies, shining this young artist's bright light over a dark night at Hunter's Point. ■■

Editor's Note: After interviewing for this story, the Rockmen family received a new modular home provided by the Southwest Indian Foundation. Dustin's art may be seen at the Perry Null Trading Co., 1710 S. 2nd St., Gallup, NM, 87301; (505) 863-5249 or (505) 722-3806; [www.pntrader.com](http://www.pntrader.com).

Leo W. Banks keeps Dustin's drawing, *The Handsome Horse Man*, in a treasured place in his Tucson home. He enjoyed meeting and getting to know all the Rockmen children. He also wrote the history story about the Confederates fighting the Apaches and the Back Road Adventure in this issue.

Don B. Stevenson of Tempe travels the Navajo Indian Reservation often. He found his visit with Dustin Rockmen not only enjoyable but inspirational.

**THE HANDSOME HORSE MAN**  
I've asked him to sketch my portrait. "You have to make me look handsome," I say, adding a wisecrack about the enormity of the task. Dustin's face sparkles and he breaks into a wide, dimpled grin. "I know, I'll make him a horse. Maybe I'll give him a tail, too."

