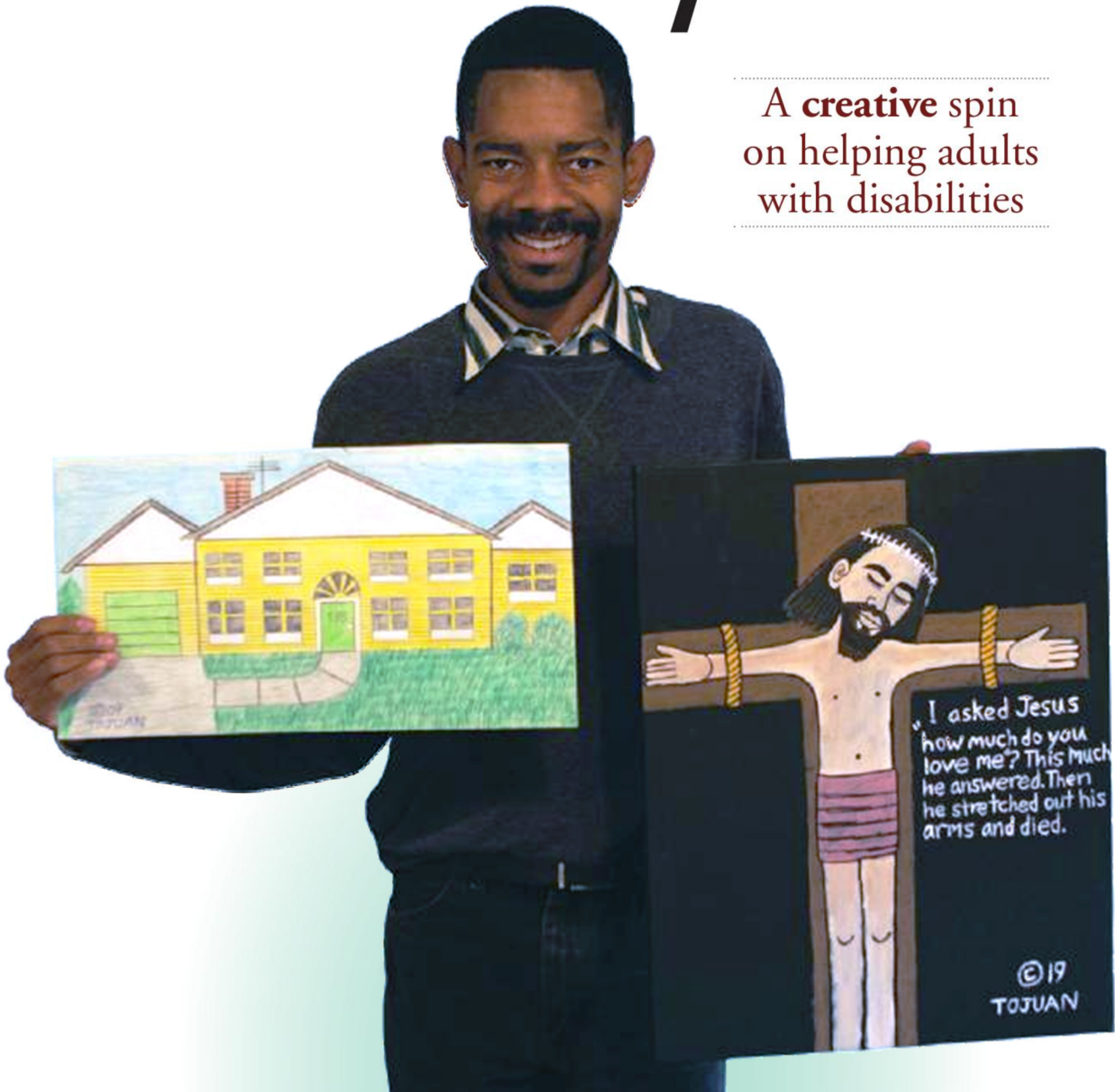


Creative Enterprises

A **creative** spin
on helping adults
with disabilities



A CRISP AUTUMN BREEZE RUNS THROUGH THE AIR as Tojuan Hawkins walks his dogs Topaz and Buttabeen around his family's farm, tucked in the outskirts of Gwinnett. Afterward, he trudges outdoors to begin his daily routine: pulling weeds, mowing the expanse of acreage his family owns, preparing beds, turning on the drip irrigation, and seeking other odds and ends to tend to around his parents' property in Grayson. When he's through, he heads into the house to dress for the day.

Finally, around 7:15, as the sun begins its steady climb above the horizon, a bus from Pioneer Transportations collects Hawkins at the curb and rolls away, delivering him at the facility where he'll spend the majority of his day—Creative Enterprise.

The organization's name is exactly what it suggests—an enterprise that's creative in its approach to helping those who face cognitive challenges and disabilities. Leigh McIntosh, founder and CEO of the organization, established it in 1979 to help this demographic gain access to social and life skills they're otherwise deprived of. Her organization's aim is to provide training through off-site work training, job placement assistance, educational program and community involvement events.

"Those with disabilities aren't always granted the opportunities they rightfully deserve," says McIntosh. Her company helps bridge that gap, and its values reflect its passion, stating: "We accept each other for our own unique individual contributions while providing a caring environment where persons with disabilities can feel safe and connected... We use [a] three-pronged approach [to keep] people engaged at all times, developing caring relationships with each individual, and using lavish praise and positive reinforcement as a proactive behavior management strategy to reduce negative behaviors."

Hawkins is a prime example of one of the organization's many success stories. At forty-four, he's spent his years coping with challenges that have prevented him from immersing into society. For instance, he'd have difficulty in social settings and trouble making friends, despite many well-intended efforts. The more he'd try, the more he'd end up pushing people away. Often, his failed attempts would lead to mounting frustrations. The emotions would often control him, making him lose focus and harbor repressed feelings he didn't know how to relinquish, making way for anger and resentment.

Hawkins' parents knew they had to do something. After they moved to Gwinnett from Long Island, New York in 2004, they set to work searching for local places that would help Hawkins embrace himself and manage his emotions. They researched a few facilities before finally settling on Creative Enterprise. "It felt like the right environment for Tojuan.

He immediately fell in love with it," says Mrs. Hawkins.

Once he was welcomed to Creative Enterprise, Hawkins was assessed so the staff could determine his needs and decide on the best approach to meet them.

"Creative Enterprises uses a proactive behavior management program that offers lots of praise and positive reinforcement, keeps each person engaged at all times, and develops caring

relationships with each individual. When used together, our individuals know that they are cared for, this is enforced continually and they are so busy, they do not have time to act out," says McIntosh. "When we first met Tojuan, it was apparent he really wanted to be part of a group. He likes people but needed help in showing his feelings in an appropriate way."

One of the things the staff at Creative Enterprise learned right off the bat was about Hawkins' undeniable interest in gardening—and most obvious—his passion for art. "He is naturally artistic, so we got him involved in the art program," says McIntosh.

Hawkins admits this was the right approach. "I'd love to become a true artist one day," he says. As an art fanatic, he paints African theme and religious art and also works with ceramics, fleur-de-lis designs and creates masks using the Mexican Day of the Dead theme—he even admits to a brief stint with pottery. However, unlike most aspiring artists, Hawkins has already seen some successes with his hobby, all thanks to Creative Enterprise. Perhaps, among his greatest accomplishments is when his work was selected to be exhibited in the Gwinnett County Fair through their affiliation with Creative Enterprise—and won first prize. To top it off, Hawkins art has also been showcased in Atlanta's Gallery—also in partnership with Creative Enterprise—in downtown Atlanta, where he's sold several pieces.

"I started getting into art back in high school," he says. According to him, it started off as the occasional doodle and a sporadic art class, but soon, Hawkins' love flourished into a passion that manifested itself in magnificent ways through his work. McIntosh vouches for his unique and exceptional talent, saying, "He's a true, self-taught, folk artist. His works sell out faster than he can complete it."

But art is just the beginning of Hawkins' hobbies. He's also an avid biker. "He doesn't have a driver's license," says Mrs. Hawkins, but he enjoys getting out and riding to the grocery store, Tribble Mill Park, a nearby movie theater, pretty much anything near home."

After some time at Creative Enterprise and discovering channels to express his talent, Hawkins began to notice a positive transformation in himself. He had a routine, attending the facility Tuesday through Friday and engaging in a different activity each day.

"Every day is different and interesting," says Hawkins. His week at Creative Enterprises kicks off on

Tuesdays when he visits Lawrenceville Elementary School with four peers and reads to students.

Wednesdays he works at a warehouse, where he sometimes sweeps or helps

out with odds and ends, receiving a small stipend for his efforts.

Thursdays and Fridays are his favorite—art class.

"It's a very structured environment that he does really well with," says Mrs. Hawkins. But beyond the structure, she says that Creative Enterprises has helped Hawkins gain skills and improve interaction with his peers. "They go out into the community, shop for holiday gifts together at Target or Walmart, do lunch



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“

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Aside from his adventures at Creative Enterprises, Hawkins also enjoys downtime with his parents.

"My family makes me very happy," Hawkins says.

"We're pretty close knit," agrees Mrs. Hawkins. "We take on family projects together all the time. We've had a greenhouse for about four years or so and needed to revamp it. Tojuan took the old plastic off, so we're using it as a citrus house for the citrus and fruit trees we have here on the property."

Even in these interactions at home, the changes Mrs. Hawkins sees are noteworthy. "He's come a long way from where he started, and as he gets older, it's nice that he always has something to do and someplace to go. If it weren't for Creative, I'm not sure what Tojuan as a whole would be like. They have academics and so much more to help people keep busy and bring out the best in them, and we've definitely seen a positive impact."

Hawkins agrees that Creative Enterprise is the best choice for him. "I'd rather be here than out on my own," he says. "I've made a lot of friends, and I really enjoy going there. I'd say it's a good experience for me."

McIntosh, who worked with several clients like Hawkins, couldn't agree more. "Tojuan is one of those people that makes a difference in the world. I have nothing but admiration for him because he does not focus on his disability but focuses on how he can help others."

Overall, Hawkins parents agree that Creative Enterprises has been a huge game changer they would strongly suggest to others. "I highly recommend the program," says Mrs. Hawkins. "I've recommended it to people who have a disabled adult. Sometimes, these people don't know where to go and Creative guides them and tells them what to do. They're there with open arms for everyone. And they have people all the way aged to seniors in their late fifties or around sixty, which makes it life changing for that population. It's a structured environment that enables them to just live life the way everyone deserves."

somewhere like Steak n' Shake and McAlisters, go for different outings, ballgames, things like that," says Mrs. Hawkins.

But Hawkins progress runs much deeper than simply enjoying hobbies and touting successes with peer interactions. Several years ago, Creative Enterprises initiated a program called Creative Acts of Kindness, in which Hawkins plays a critical role.

"As our country seems to become more polarized, at least according to the media," says McIntosh, "We wanted to show how we are much more similar than different. Kindness is something we can all choose on a daily basis to actually make a difference for someone. Tojuan loves to be part of this initiative. He helps us with the food drive we do with the Aurora Theater for the local food banks. He goes into the community to give out Creative Acts of Kindness signs. He loves to go into the community on outings and is one of the first to talk with people in the community or if they come to our program. Tojuan also goes to a company in the community called Radial, where he works with a small group of people from Creative Enterprises. He is paid minimum wage to do this job and takes pride in the work he does."