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PHOTOS: NICK AGRO, STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Joseph Lee holds a sketch of his father, who has Parkinson's, in his garage art studio. Lee worked on his art through a free program.

HEART OF THE HOUSEHOLD

Bound for Harvard in August, Sonora High grad Joseph Lee will leave behind the family he's helped keep together through tough times.

By **BRIAN WHITEHEAD** / STAFF WRITER

Joseph Lee hasn't had many opportunities of late to be himself.

A son and a brother, he's also been a caregiver and a guardian. A student and a source of positivity.

The glue holding his family together.

With a brush or a pencil in his hand, Lee has been able to enjoy being a teenager.

"Art gives me a way to speak," he said. "As all these



Joseph Lee created self portraits during his time studying at Ryman Arts, which hosts art classes at Cal State Fullerton.

different things came around, I felt I had a social obligation to tell my story somehow."

Lee's older brother, David, is autistic. Their father, Ken Soo, has Parkinson's disease.

For 10-plus years, Lee has helped his mother, Ieesun, tend to both.

Rare is the day he's not doing something for someone else.

"I tell Joseph that this family is the fruit of his behavior, and now we're harvesting," Ieesun Lee said. "It's a fruitful season.

“Our family motto is: No pain, no gain,” she continued. “But my husband doesn’t like how negative that sounds, so it’s: Yes pain, yes gain.”

Long before developing Parkinson’s, Ken Soo Lee, a veteran, thrived as an entrepreneur.

His business took off during the Silicon Valley boom, and his family lived comfortably in San Diego.

Joseph Lee said his father used to take him to Legoland, SeaWorld, Fry’s Electronics.

And, they’d go fishing.

“My dad loved fishing,” Lee said.

“We’d always go to the pier. At family reunions, we’d go to the ocean, spend the whole day fishing.”

When the recession hit in the late 2000s, the Lees moved to Fullerton.

Ieesun Lee had always enrolled her sons at different schools. That way, she said, her youngest didn’t feel pressured to watch after her oldest.

But Joseph did so anyway.

“We didn’t push him to do it,” his mother said. “But if God gave you that ability to help someone else, share it. Help those people.”

Early in his 40s, Ken Soo Lee was diagnosed with Parkinson’s

To his family, the disease’s debilitating effects revealed themselves subtly.

Joseph Lee said his father often stared at things for long periods of time. He lost mobility and flexibility. He had “on” days and “off” days.

“That’s when I realized my father’s life would be changing dramatically,” he said.

In middle school, Lee and his father argued regularly. Ieesun Lee recently chalked it up to teenaged angst.

Her son considered his father neglectful for missing school recitals and other performances. They eventually had a falling out.

Parkinson’s changed their relationship for the better, Joseph Lee said.

“As long as you focus on Jesus, and you’re able to do what you want to do, then I’m happy for you,” his father told him soon after his diagnosis.

Said Lee: “What I admire about my dad is his humility. He’s very wise. It’s overwhelming sometimes for me. His fatherly wisdom, and his love, too.”

Joseph Lee grew up a craftsman. The kid who turned junk into art.

He would make toy guns out of cardboard and stoves out of tin cans.

“I’d do the weirdest things,” he joked. “But I just wanted to do stuff with my hands.”

Lee also could draw. He and his brother lost evenings drawing together in the garage.

But in high school, Lee temporarily shelved his art supplies for another hobby: archery.

To buy new equipment, Lee entered an art competition his freshman year.

He drew his younger sister crying, her tears morphing into a butterfly.

He called it “Hope.”

And, won the \$1,500 grand prize.

Lee transferred from Troy High to Sonora High as a sophomore, joining his brother at the school. He became a member of Sonora’s International Baccalaureate and Advanced Placement art programs.

Around that time, he was accepted into Ryman Arts – a nonprofit that provides free advanced art classes at Cal State Fullerton for the area’s youth.

Most Saturday mornings for three years, Lee spent 3-plus hours in a studio learning technique, perspective and other design skills from experts.

For as long as Lee can remember, he’s found fulfillment in exploring “the juxtaposition between two rivaling ideas” in art.

Dark versus light. Good versus evil. No matter the winner, he said, the contrast “brings out some truth.”

“I realized how much art enhances the world,” he said. “Art is so integral to being human.”

Having graduated from Sonora and from Ryman in May, Lee leaves for Harvard next month.

His family plans on flying to Massachusetts to see him off.

When they return home, they’ll no longer have Lee to protect his brother or support his father.

“Don’t worry, we’ll be OK,” Ieesun Lee has told her son about leaving for college.

“Just live life to the fullest.”

"Artists break down stereotypes that teenagers can only be one thing; that a high school student has to form an identity around one subject, one asset. Here's a young man building his identity around all of his assets. He's a very special young man."

- Diane Brigham, Ryman Arts' Executive Director, on Joseph Lee

