

•THEBIGTHING•

Artists in the making

Pathlight School students design merchandise for shops. By SERENE LUO

WALK into Pathlight School and the first thing you will

see is a special gift shop, stocked with colourful items such as T-shirts, posters, notebooks, painted canvases and embroidered bags.

But these aren't your usual gifts. Each of them was designed by a student at the school, which serves six- to 18-year-olds with autism.

Autism is a developmental disorder which may start as early as infancy. Autistic people generally have problems making eye contact and talking, and may appear to be unaware of other people's feelings. Some experts believe it is caused by a problem with one's genes, the "blueprint" that makes us unique.

At Pathlight, the 600 students are taught skills for social interaction, daily living and work habits. Each learns at his own pace. Students are encouraged to submit drawings to the school's design studio, where trained graphic designers pick out exceptional pieces and turn them into merchandise for sale.

The school says the activity develops autistic children's self-esteem. Many people often do not understand them and may bully or ostracise them.

Student artist Hardy Ja'afar, 13, created a series of T-shirts about burgers. He loves word play and puns, said design coach Victor Ong, and his drawings literally depict cows or chickens sandwiched between buns.

"I want to do another drawing about hot dogs next," said Hardy. Mr Ong chuckled in response, and said that

Hardy would probably draw a dog sweating buckets.

The items are sold at various shops such as DoodleShop, Papermarket at Raffles City, Professor Brawn Cafe in Novena Square and Sky Pilates at Liat Towers, as well as the school's online shop – the Pathlight e-Mall.

Every sale earns the artist a royalty fee, said Ms Denise Phua, the supervisor of the Pathlight school board.

"This recognition fee helps them appreciate the value of money and teaches them that they must work for a living too," Ms Phua said, adding that many students put away the cash to pay for further studies.

Pathlight focuses strongly on teaching students work ethics so they can fit into the real world after leaving the school.

Nicole Koo, 18, whose painting of a peony was turned into an embroidered bag, said she had bought a few bags for her friends, who were "surprised" at



ST PHOTO, TED CHEN

Pathlight students Ng Li Jie, 13, Tay Jun Yi, 14, Ronald Chan Weijie, 12, Jonathan Yeo, 16, Fabian Tan, 14, Zina Chia, 17, Jovan Neo, 10, Hardy Bin Ja'afar, 13, Seah Guan Yi, 12, Nicole Koo Ning, 18, and Glenn Phua, 13, showing off their work. With them is Ms Denise Phua (back row, fourth from the right), supervisor of the Pathlight school board.

Did you know?

The special thing about autistic people is that about 10 per cent of them have been found to be highly talented at something. For example, working with computers, maths, music or, in this case, art, said Ms Denise Phua, supervisor of the Pathlight School board. In comparison, only 1 per cent of the general population has such special talents, she said.

Go to www.emall.pathlight.org.sg to view and buy items created by the students.

her work. "When my dad and I came to the store, they were all sold out," she said with a hint of pride in her voice.

Ng Li Jie, 13, who taught himself how to paint and draw, said the store, with all its colourful artwork and merchandise, gives him "a sense of inspiration".

"If possible, I would like my work to be on postcards so more people can carry them around," he said.