Visit to museum inspires creativity in young artist

By Mary Keck 812-331-4353 | mkeck@heraldt.com | Posted: Monday, October 19, 2015 12:03 am

Arlo Altop is a second-grader from University Elementary School, and he is into trucks.

“Trucks are fun, important. I mean really important,” Arlo said. “They just happen to be able to hold a little bit more stuff.”

These days, it isn’t just trucks that Arlo’s into, though. He likes art, too.

He got interested in art when his class went on a school field trip to the Indiana University Art Museum. While there, Arlo spotted an acrylic painting called “Forbearance.”

“It was near the last stop when we went to this painting that was a truck with a bunch of stuff on the back — a crane unloading it and somebody getting out of the truck — and I really liked that picture,” Arlo said. “I also liked the name of the person who made it: John Himmelfarb.”

Arlo expressed so much interest in the painting that his teacher sent a message to his mom, Rebecca Altop, about how enthusiastic Arlo got during the field trip.

When he got home from school, Arlo’s mom asked him about the painting.

“He immediately started drawing and said he wanted to meet this artist and was very excited,” Altop said.

Arlo tapes pieces of paper together with duct tape because his drawings of trucks are so big. The trucks and machines he draws are colorful, with big wheels and lots of windows with passengers looking out and smiling from inside.

“I’ve never really noticed him being drawn to any art at all,” Altop said of Arlo’s sudden enthusiasm for drawing. “He’s never shown a huge interest in it until he saw (Himmelfarb’s painting), and it really sparked an interest in it for him,” she said.

Arlo drew a big yellow truck for Himmelfarb.
“It was really weird because it was a pickup truck that had enough room for 40 people. It was a really nice looking truck,” Arlo said.

On a whim, Altop decided to check Himmelfarb’s website for an address where Arlo could send the drawing. When she didn’t find one, she sent Himmelfarb an email.

“I told Arlo, ‘Don’t get your hopes up, because the chances are he won’t respond.’ He responded within 15 minutes,” she said.

Himmelfarb not only gave Arlo an address where he could send his drawing, but he also invited Arlo and his mom to Chicago to attend the opening of one of his exhibits. So, they went.

What was it like for Arlo to meet Himmelfarb?

“My experience of meeting him was amazing, happy and awesome all at the same time,” Arlo said. “He was friendly. He happened to be really nice. I loved his artwork. I think he liked me.”

Today, Arlo’s drawing hangs in Himmelfarb’s studio.

“I’m always pleased to hear someone has responded positively to my work, whatever the age of that person,” Himmelfarb said in an email.

Responding to Arlo’s interest was important to Himmelfarb because of his experiences as a child.

“I also remember getting responses from adults when I was a child and made inquiries or comments. I found those things very important then and remember some of them clearly now,” he said.

For Arlo, making the connection with Himmelfarb has been a memorable experience, and Altop feels it’s taught her son that his actions can have an effect.

“We really want to teach Arlo that anything’s possible and is always worth a try, so even if you hear ‘no’ or you don’t get a response, it’s worth trying anyway,” Altop said. “It has taught him a lot about how powerful he is.”

What’s next for Arlo Altop?

“If you’re wondering what I want to be when I grow up, I want to be an inventor and an artist,” he said.

He wants to invent a truck that can handle any rough terrain, except lava.

“Lava, you know, can melt through anything except maybe bedrock,” he said.

Arlo says he’ll keep drawing, too.

“Even when I grow up to become a big boy inventor.”