



PHOTOS BY MARK FINKENSTEDT FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

It's a jungle in there: artist Stacey Sachs and son Justin in the bedroom she painted for him.

Living in a Fantasy World

A Mother's Dreamlike Mural Enchants Her Son

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Decorative painters have enjoyed a wave of popularity in recent years. Armed with brushes and talent, they have produced the illusion of fluffy clouds on foyer ceilings in Potomac, faux marble across baseboards on Capitol Hill, dreamy murals of vineyards and villas in Ballston.

Stacey Sachs brought to her painting project some special qualifications: for one, her background as an exacting medical illustrator; for another, a mother's powerful drive to create a cheerful fantasy in her son Justin's bedroom.

For his nine years, Justin, a sunny fourth-grader who attends Greenwood Elementary School in Brookeville, has battled a rare progressive genetic disorder, familial dysautonomia, that causes a constellation of problems, including serious developmental delays. In Justin's case, as in most, it requires nourishment through a feeding tube. Two years ago, after spotting a mural in a friend's room, he asked his mom if she would paint a jungle tableau in his room. "How could I say no?" says Sachs. "Justin is my heart and sunshine."

Moreover, the timing was right. "After working as a medical illustrator in the federal government for 10 years," says Sachs, "I had accepted a job in the private sector only to get laid off seven months later." For the first time in

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The tiger and the tree frog are Justin's favorite animals.

A Mural for Justin

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years, she would have hours to devote to something besides detailed renderings of human anatomy, says her husband, Adam Sachs, a director of manufacturing for Qiagen Sciences, a biotech company in nearby Germantown. Both he and his wife are 38. Jonah, the family's newest addition, is 14 months.

After eight months of off-and-on work, the fruit of

Stacey Sachs's labors, "Justin's Jungle," is a panorama of lush vegetation and wildlife wrapping around three sides of her son's bedroom.

Sparkling rivers and misty waterfalls gleam in the distance as an elephant advances, a chimp swings from the vines and a remarkably present tiger peers out from a glossy thicket. The giant green fronds fairly stir with the ghost of Henri Rousseau, a 19th-century French painter famed for his fanciful jungle scenes.

Creating the mural required joint research by mother and son. They pored through stacks of National Geographic magazines, encyclopedias and books such as the "Great Kapok Tree" by Lynne Cherry—one of Justin's favorites—to sort out the exact flora and fauna he wanted around him, right down to the red-eyed, yellow-toed tree frog at the room's entrance. They were inspired by a mural they visited several times at the Smithsonian's Museum of Natural History Insect Zoo.

"We picked out everything together," says his mom.

Trained to produce precise, three-dimensional illustrations of human anatomy in pen and ink on letter-size sheets, Sachs says her experience with exotic plants and animals on a jumbo scale was nil.

"These were very large walls," she says. Plus, much of her professional work is computer generated (she now does freelance illustrations for the medical and legal professions). But "this required traditional techniques including painting with acrylics, which I'd never used before."

The larger format proved more workable than anticipated. She compensated by



Justin Sachs, 9, is a talkative boy, avid reader and jigsaw puzzle aficionado who says the tiger in his mural protects him at night.



Stacey Sachs worked on a grand scale in Justin's room although her background is in more diminutive medical illustration.

sketching animals and vegetation on tracing paper in her own meticulous fashion and then magnified the scale by projecting the images on the wall.

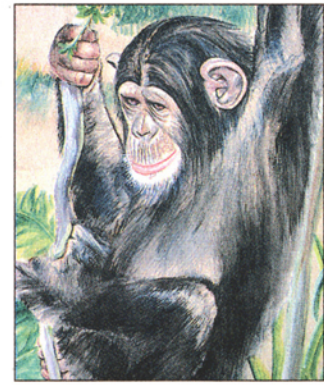
She points out a few instances of artistic license, like the leaves on the mandrake tree to the left of the tiger. (She had to improvise because the picture of the particular tree that inspired it had no foliage.) And a few of the very domesticated houseplants from the Sachs family room, including a spathiphyllum, turned up in the primeval setting of the mural.

Today, there's just a bit of wall left to be done, but

Sachs is already hard at work on outside commissions, including a dinosaur mural for the office of her boys' pediatrician (www.muralstolife.net).

"It's hard to believe that this opportunity has opened the doors for a new career direction," she says. "I never expected to do art of this magnitude, but it's a lot of fun. I love that Justin's so thrilled with his new room and seeing his face as he gazes at his jungle."

Justin is particularly taken with the benevolent tiger. "He's neat," he says. "He protects me at night."



A chimp with a friendly countenance.

