

Artists paint portraits for children facing serious health issues

Nonprofit Portrait Connections art enjoyed by children locally and nationwide

By Angel Carpenter
Blue Mountain Eagle

Elaine Eisenbraun of Long Creek has been on a mission to bring art and smiles to children facing serious health challenges and their families.

She is the founder of a growing nonprofit called Portrait Connection that brings portraits created by talented artists to children, while also raising awareness in their communities of the hardships those families experience.

Since the nonprofit started taking off in spring 2017, artists have painted portraits of dozens of children, working from photographs, and by the end of the year, Eisenbraun expects a total of 60 portraits.

Her two adult daughters, Kristen Eisenbraun and Laura Eisenbraun, are a big part of the Portrait Connection team. Elaine homeschooled her girls in their early years, and art was encouraged.

The idea for Portrait Connection began when the family lived back East.

"It started because dear friends of ours had both of their children diagnosed with cystic fibrosis," Elaine said. "We wanted to send along a message that was enduring and let them know that we care for them and would always be there for them."

Elaine said that in 2014 Kristen was painting in their home, and she asked Kristen about creating a portrait of the kids.

"They were blown away," Elaine said. "When they called, the mom said, 'We hung the portrait where it is the first thing we see in the morning, and it gives us the strength to get through each daily challenge. This is a treasure!'"

It was the feeling the Eisenbrauns had with this experience that was a catalyst for the nonprofit.

"It was her words that made us think, 'We've got to do this for other people,'" Elaine said. "We just dove in. Sometimes, you just have to take a leap of faith."

Elaine retired as executive director of the North Fork Watershed Council in Long Creek in 2016. She has a master's degree in business leadership and is a published author and nonprofit consultant.

Laura has a bachelor's of fine arts and a master's in nonprofit development, and Kristen has studied art at New York Academy of Art, Montana State University and in residency in New Zealand.

Wanting to offer this service to others, Elaine approached the editor of A&E Cascade art magazine in Bend in December 2017 and asked if a brief could



Kristen Eisenbraun, left, presented a portrait of Kaitlyn painted by artist Leslie Peck. The artwork was presented to Kaitlyn in Saratoga Springs, New York, in August of 2018.

be added to get the word out about what they were trying to accomplish.

She was told to bring 10 portraits in by March 1 to feature in the magazine, and they would put it on the front page of their April magazine with a feature article.

An art show was held at Laylor Art + Supply in Bend with a total of 14 portraits displayed, including the painting created by Kristen.

As with all their shows, the pieces are covered with a cloth at the start of an exhibition, then each work is unveiled one at a time by the artists with a presentation for each child and their family.

The art is then on display in the gallery for a few weeks for everyone to enjoy.

"We realized that, by bringing the whole community in, that we were doing something magical," Elaine said. "So, we had a public art opening where people in the community could be more aware of people going through medical tumult."

Messages from the families who've received the portraits have been encouraging.

Parents of one child said it was the most cherished gift they'd ever received, and another said they wouldn't trade their painting for a million dollars, Elaine said.

The artists have been touched by their involvement as well.

Elaine spoke of a child who had been blinded due to a brain tumor. A painting was made for the family and an idea was formed to create a piece the child could enjoy as well.

The painter suggested a sculptor they knew.

Elaine said the artist working on the head sculpture "cried and cried" as she sat before the clay — her own mother died of a brain tumor.

Several artists have said they felt a connection to the child while creating their art.

Patricia Ross of Mt. Vernon and Kim Randleas of John Day have taken part in the program, working on portraits of local children.

Ross, who has painted portraits since the 1980s, said she's halfway through an oil painting of a 7- to 8-year-old youngster — a girl she has not met. She works from several photographs of the child.

"It's such an honor to do this," Ross said. "All sorts of things are going through your mind when you're working on the portrait. We take so much for granted when we have our health."

She said she's dwelling on the positive with the colors in the portrait, including a blue sky.

"Elaine is doing a wonderful thing for the families, and including the artists in on this is a neat thing," Ross said. "I'm thankful that I was given this talent and am able to use it in this way."

Elaine said it's important that the artists are paid for their work.

"They put thousands of brush strokes together for the family," she said, adding they are pleased to be able to serve.

In February, the Oregon Arts Commission awarded a \$6,000 grant to Portrait Connection to use in Eastern Oregon, engaging a minimum of 12 artists to paint 12 portraits of children struggling with serious health issues.

The grant funds are being used to pay artist fees, purchase program supplies and for indirect costs.

Long Creek resident Jan Ensign, a retired physician's assistant, said she admires the program Eisenbraun is building.

"What a great thing to do for these families who have such tragedies going on in their lives," Ensign said. "It's something for the families to be excited about ... It's also exposing some of the artists, in our area as well as other cities, from one side of the United States to the other."

Eisenbraun noted they have "zero overhead." She hopes to receive backing from investors for the nonprofit as they create a track record that shows their growth and achievements.

Portrait Connection art exhibitions have been held at two venues in Bend, as well as shows in South Carolina and Arizona.

Closer to home, an art show is scheduled for 6-8 p.m. Friday, Sept. 6, at Eastern Oregon University's Houk Hall in La Grande. The public is invited.

After opening day, the display will move to Art Center East at 1006 Penn Ave.

There are 12 portraits cur-

rently in the works for children from Grant, Willamette, Umatilla, Union, Baker and Malheur counties, and most of the artists are also from those areas.

"We have some phenomenal artists for Eastern Oregon," Eisenbraun said.

The children were nominated by doctors, schools and the Central Oregon Disability Network, which covers an area from central Oregon to Idaho.

Other shows are planned for South Carolina, Minnesota and Kentucky.

Eisenbraun said there is much more to the portraits than just a nice gift.

"Science shows that art can help to improve the healing process or speed it up at the very least," she said.

Also, the children receiving portraits may have lost their hair to chemotherapy or may have a sallow look, but in the art "they see themselves reflected as smiling and beautiful, and it brings them strength," she said.

"For parents, we call it a sanctuary for them where they can at anytime, day or night, see their child smiling and have the thought that 'We're going to get it done,'" she said.

"Art is core to being human," she said. "It's creating and using that creativity to do something meaningful."

Eisenbraun said the nonprofit has been a passion for her, and she's met the challenges along the way head to head.

"We're the only nonprofit in the world that does this — we've had some interest from England, so we're starting to be far reaching," she said. "I guess I'd say it's meant to be, it's a worthy endeavor and people are gaining incredible value in their lives."

For more information about Portrait Connection, visit portraitconnection.org.

Artists for the Eastern Oregon project include Patricia Ross, Grant County; Kim Randleas, Grant County; Rodd Ambrosion, Walla Walla County; Anna Vogel, Walla Walla County; Susan Kuznitsky, Portland; Brooke Walker-Knoblich, Portland; Kristen Eisenbraun, South Carolina; Ella Eland, Colorado; Luz Celeste Figueroa, South Carolina; and Joseph Pfeifer-Herbert, New Jersey.



Young LilyAna points to a portrait of herself by Winnie Givot, who holds the painting, as LilyAna's parents Crystal and Chad stand next to their daughter at Laylor Art + Supply gallery in Bend.



A portrait of a young Bend resident, Lucy, was painted by Laurel Knight. Lucy is one of several children who've had their portraits painted for their families through the nonprofit organization Portrait Connection, founded by Long Creek resident Elaine Eisenbraun.



Artist Travis Knight, left, presents a portrait he painted of Stryder, presented in April of 2018 at Laylor Art + Supply gallery in Bend.

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