Transformed People, Transforming A Region

By Victoria Ford

"Transformed people, transforming a region" is one phrase prominently displayed on a wall inside the sanctuary of Shore Vineyard Church in Toms River, where eight painted portraits stood draped on easels during the Dec. 7, 2019 gallery reception for a community art exhibit celebrating local homeless men and women. The opening included music by pianist Alyssa Storm-Gould, interpretive dance by Sarah Litwinetz, words of encouragement and light refreshments. Admission was gift cards of any amount to local shops and/or clean, warm socks, to be distributed to the homeless community through Shore vineyard's partner organizations and other churches.



Dancer Sarah Litwinetz.
Photo credit: Victoria Ford

The effects of the portraits' unveilings, each in turn, were dramatic and profound.

Five artists – Jim Spaloss, Barbara Whelan, Kat Tobin, Susan Hoenge and Judy Goddard – had volunteered to paint seven portraits of the homeless men and women who regularly attend Shore Vineyard's Tuesday and Thursday evening meals. They worked from photographs and donated their talents to raising funds for the homeless community.



ARA Exhibit at Shore Vineyard Church.
Photo credit: Victoria Ford

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As the drapes were lifted from the canvases, gasps of disbelief and praise came from the audience in response to the likenesses revealed.



Painting of Bob.
Photo credit: Victoria Ford

The goal, according to organizers, was twofold: "First, we are asking God to reveal the treasure inside each one we paint, and to call that treasure to the forefront in our paintings, so others can glimpse the masterpieces living right in our neighborhoods. Second, we desire to generate some profit from the sale of the original paintings and prints to benefit the homeless ones and help them find their way home." Some proceeds were earmarked for Living Water Community Church to buy a shower truck for those in need. The price of one painting was a minimum donation of $300; prints were going for $10 and $20.

Organizer Taffy Spaloss read the parable of the Master Painter, who painted his subjects not the way they actually appeared, but rather the way they would become. He said, "I paint the finished pot, not the lump of clay."

The moral of the story: Art elevates people.



Jaime and his painting.
Photo credit: Victoria Ford

Can lives be changed through a painting? Taffy Spaloss posed the rhetorical question to the room for silent consideration.

Meanwhile, guest speaker Greg Andrus, photographer and author of Portraits of the Jersey Shore: Everyone Has a Story (for which he conducted over 1,000 interviews in four years, and no two alike), shared his own story of hope, concluding: "God is at work in all of us."

He was honored to be invited to speak at the opening, he said. "Casting a spotlight on our homeless friends is a noble thing to do." While others might choose to ignore the homeless, averting their eyes from an uncomfortable reality, "This church invites them in and calls them family."

Andrus, too, was homeless for a time in his 20s, he said. Drunk and living in a

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tent in the woods, “I didn’t know how to live any other way.” After surviving a gunshot wound that could have killed him, he said, with God’s help he turned his life around.

Jim Spaloss recalled inspiration from the Creative Church Arts Conference, where a man was painting the less fortunate in order to show “they are more than just their circumstances.” The result was uplifting, he said; when the subjects saw their portraits, they saw something of value in the painting that they could not see in themselves.



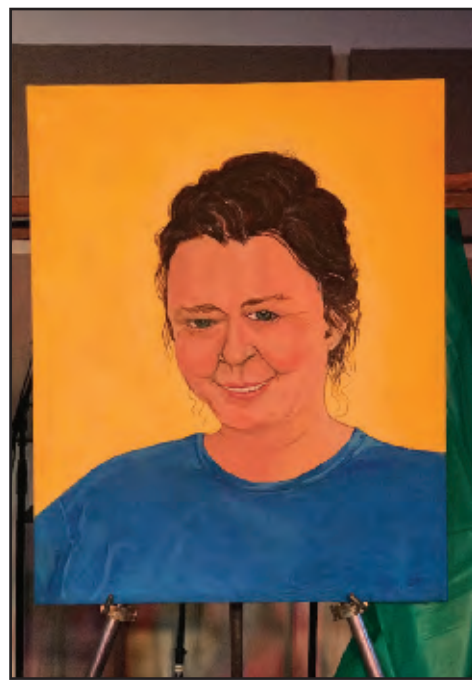
Painting of Paul.
Photo credit: Victoria Ford

Spaloss painted Paul, who has a servant’s heart. For Paul’s habit of welcoming newcomers and mentoring younger people, he has earned the nickname “cruise director.” Spaloss also painted Bob, a cook who was laid off from a nursing home. Bob is known to be hardworking, helpful and reliable. When Ocean County gets a permanent 24-hour shelter facility, Spaloss said, Bob will run the kitchen.

Judy Goddard painted Noelle, who has worked as a waitress, has endured struggles, and has a beautiful smile. Goddard also painted Jamie, a dedicated volunteer at the food pantry.



Artist with painting of Noelle.
Photo credit: Victoria Ford



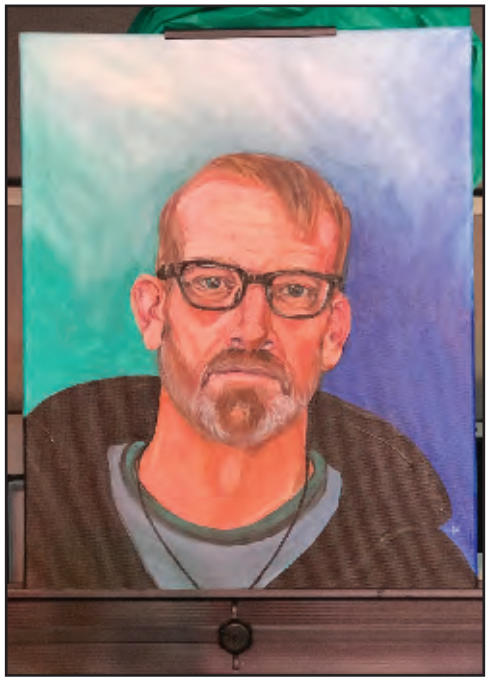
Painting of Noelle.
Photo credit: Victoria Ford

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Kat Tobin painted Randy, a union journeyman who enjoys teaching and coaching others. She said he reminded her of the tradesmen in her own family.

Susan Hoenge painted Joe "with the sparkle of glory all around him." Happily, Joe has recently found housing. In a similarly shimmering style she also painted Shepperd, who is a sharp dresser and aspires to work in the travel and hospitality industry.

Barbara Whelan painted Jimmie in two iterations – both how he sees himself (trying to seem small and hide from the spotlight), and how God sees him (standing tall and smiling radiantly).



Painting of Randy.
Photo credit: Victoria Ford

The day's final words of inspiration came from Joy Holman, a member of Shore Vineyard's leadership team, who read a poem with a powerful reminder that, when it comes to sleeping on the streets, "We're all one step away."

To learn more about the painters, the painted, and how you can help, contact Taffy Spaloss at taffy08731@yahoo.com.



Artist with painting of Randy.
Photo credit: Victoria Ford



Painting of Sheppard.
Photo credit: Victoria Ford