

Local artist further immortalizes Alton's unsung champions

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
October 12 2018 1:28 PM



ALTON – Robert Wadlow, Elijah Lovejoy, Miles Davis – these names each mean something of city pride for many Altonians.

But what of Joseph Raglin? How about William Sachtelben? Both of these men were Altonians who are forever remembered in the world's records of human achievement. Raglin, who worked as a brick layer, laid bricks across much of Alton's iconic streets, which still show some of his work. In fact, in 1929, while working for some New Deal infrastructure programs in East St. Louis, Raglin set the world record for fastest brick laying, averaging 58 bricks laid per minute over the course of an hour. Sachtelben was known for taking the roads less traveled, having been one of the first people to circumnavigate the world on a bicycle in the late 1800s – just after the modern day bicycle's most similar ancestor was invented. He crossed mountains and the Gobi Desert before returning home to Alton.

What do these two men have in common outside of calling Alton home and their superhuman drive? They are both being immortalized by local artist Monica Mason in two portraits, each eight feet tall, being proudly displayed at the Post Commons coffee house, located at 300 Alby in Alton.

“I saw Hugh Halter at the grocery store completely by accident, and he knew I did murals, so he asked me to do it,” Mason said.

Previous to these murals, Mason has spent much of her life as an artist. She recently did pieces of roughly the same size at Healthworks, a museum next to the St. Louis Science Center focusing on health-related exhibits. Many of her pieces there featured children dressed in career garb as well as farms, restaurants and an entire skeleton.

The portraits at Post Commons are each done with shades of blue. Mason said she uses traditional painting techniques dating back centuries. She said all flesh tones, regardless of race, have a first coat of blue, which is built upon with various other shades. She was going to make each portrait flesh-colored, but said Halter told her the blue had more of an effect. She agreed.

“It's amazing,” she said. “No matter what color all of us are, it all starts with the same color of blue. We build from that and those colors are mostly oranges and blues no matter who you are.”

A third painting is on the way. Mason has not yet decided who that portrait will celebrate, but she is leaning toward a strong female character advocating for people of color during Alton's Civil Rights Era.

These large portraits for some of the people from Alton who left their marks on history are the beginning of something Mason is calling the Community Portrait Project. These smaller portraits will celebrate community members who are currently living and giving Alton its texture, flavor and spirit. She said these will be ready to debut early in 2019, and is planning a gallery evening at the Post Commons to do so.

Like the two giant portraits now hung at Post Commons, these works will also celebrate both the sung and unsung heroes of Alton.