

Community Portrait Project: Scores of People Come to Admire Alton's Cast of Characters

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
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ALTON – Scores of people came in droves to witness the unveiling of the Community Portrait Project by local artist Monica Mason.

Mason was commissioned by Post Commons owner Hugh Halter to paint two pillars of unsung Alton history – world-record brick-layer Joseph Raglin and Joseph Satchelben who biked around the world. When he came to view the work, Mason, who is a traditional painter inspired by Renaissance and Baroque masters, had only done the base of coloring for the paintings. Underneath everything, Mason said each person's coloration begins with a rich mix of blues. Halter saw the portraits at this phase and deemed them perfect as they were.

Inspired by that, Mason wanted to do something to honor some of Alton's noteworthy community characters. Using the same blue scale, which she said symbolized to her deep down all human beings have the same foundation regardless of skin color, Mason painted members of the community from different backgrounds doing different things with the same love of the community shared between them. That gallery was unveiled Friday night at the Post Commons.

“I knew all of these amazing people, and I don't know if they knew each other, let alone had all been in the same room together,” she said.

One of the people featured in the gallery was Sheila Curry, popularly known as Granny from Granny's Uniforms and More on College Avenue. Her business was chosen as the 2018 Alton Business of the Year, following St. Peter's Hardware's 2017 honor. She said that as well as her inclusion in the project made her feel like she was among the ranks of Alton's great people.



“I'm very honored,” she said. “I never dreamed I would be a part of something like this. I never dreamed I would be this close to people like that.”

She was joined by her son, Eddie, daughter, Victoria, and granddaughter, Erica.

“It's an honor to be in my mother's shadow,” Eddie Curry said. “That's fine with me. My mother is the rock of our family. Her mother was the rock as well. She believed in the best for me. If I would meet a woman half as good as my mother, I'd be blessed. When my father was out there working on the car, she'd be right beside him holding the flashlight. If he was laid off work, she would be pulling us through. She has always been there like that.”

Her granddaughter Erica said similar things of her grandmother.

“I know people see me as a reflection of her and I'm honored by that,” she said. “To see her continue to grow at 70 years old gives me hope I can keep going and growing.”



Tattoo artist and owner of Grand Piasa Body Art, Chris Hinkle, said he deeply felt for the gallery, especially as an artist himself.

“When you spend that much time with a subject like that, you get to know it on a deep personal level,” he said. “She was able to do that for everyone here she painted. That's amazing.”

He said he could not properly put into words what it felt to be included in the gallery.

Sally Kirbach, who is an ardent volunteer with Alton Main Street essential in the creation of things such as the Night Market, said she was incredibly humbled and lucky and in disbelief over her inclusion in the work. She joked about getting together with Alton Main Street Executive Director Sara McGibany and painting portraits of Mason. Kirbach also said she was excited for Mason's idea to continue that project.



Honoring Mason was another theme many people held throughout the night, including Halter.

“I think Monica should do one of herself and include it, only it should be big and bright and yellow like how she brings light and joy to all of us in Alton,” he said.

Mason said she is not against painting herself and adding it to the mix, but said she has been painted and done self-portraits a lot as is. She said she wished she could have included even more people from the community into the gallery, as so many people are doing so much in the area.

As for the attendance, Mason said she was overwhelmed.

“Hugh asked me how many people I was expecting,” she said. “I expected people I featured to maybe bring their spouses or family members or someone special, but this is incredible.”