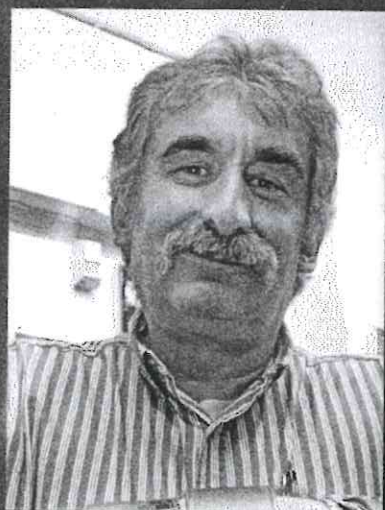


PACKET MAGAZINE

FINE LIVING IN GREATER PRINCETON

PEOPLE OF 2014



Portraits of a Town

Kevin Murphy works with students to bring public art in Hillsborough

Hillsborough prides itself on one magazine's tag as one of "the top 100 places to live in the U.S."

The distinction means more than open space, quality education and balanced economics.

Another quality that sets Hillsborough apart is the township's commitment to building a museum-grade public art collection with a new painting being added each year by a Somerset County teen.

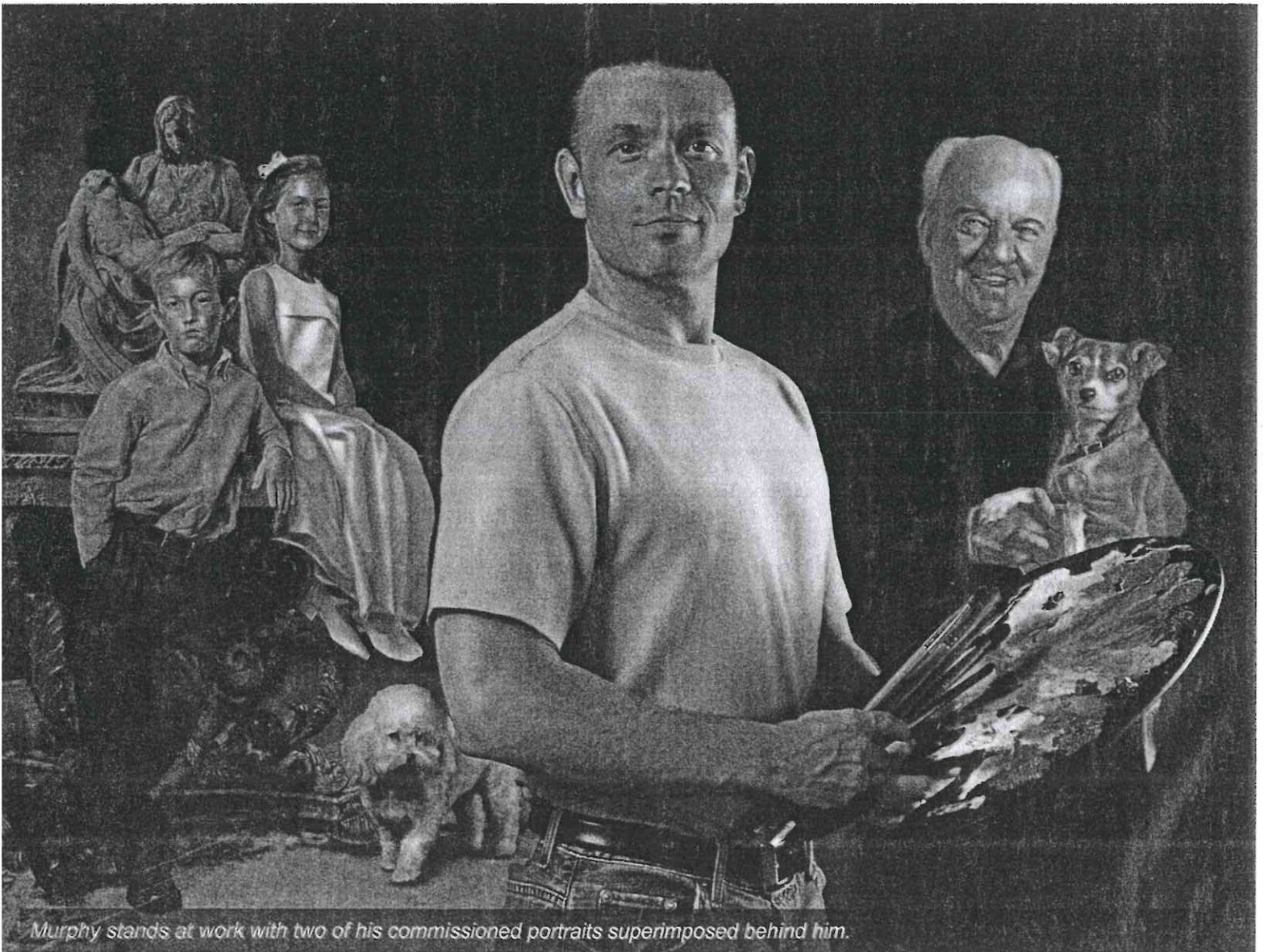
World-class artist Kevin Murphy is largely responsible for the excellence of that gallery. The first five paintings there have begun to curve

onto a second wall in the municipal building's meeting room.

Their striking quality is reflective of Mr. Murphy's passion for perfection and his drive to compile the collection for his adopted hometown.

Through the Cultural Arts Commission, Mr. Murphy organizes the selection of the teen artist and donates the personal training for a year. During that time, the student is prepared to produce the portrait, which will hang publicly forever.

The drive to build a township gallery grew out of a call to serve his new hometown when he moved to Hillsborough in 2006 with his wife, Mia,



Murphy stands at work with two of his commissioned portraits superimposed behind him.



The portraits hang in the meeting/courtroom in Hillsborough's municipal building. From left, professional football player Shaun O'Hara, opera singer Anna Case, philanthropist Do'ris Duke, Olympic runner Joetta Clark-Diggs and Assemblyman and former mayor Peter Biondi.

and their two daughters. He operates the Art Academy of Hillsborough studio in [ast: name??:]flex warehouse complex off Jill Court.

The studio walls are filled with examples of Mr. Murphy's works and those of his students. In one corner hangs a painting by Halley, one of his two daughters, who is intent on following in his footsteps, her dad says.

Mr. Murphy's life story tells you he doesn't do anything less than excellently. He has summoned and honed his talent after nearly failing — his own fault, he admits — to get through formal public education.

Few would have predicted Mr. Murphy's success when he was growing up. He graduated from Kennedy High School in the Bronx barely literate, he admits, and latched onto a union carpenter's apprenticeship.

He says he discovered reading . . . science fiction at first, with a nugget in one book piquing his interest to spur him to the next. He learned to speed read, allowing him to devour 700 to 800 books in three years, he estimates. Many were consumed on his subway commute to jobs in lower Manhattan, sometimes the last 50 pages on a train platform bench.

From 1987 to 1990, as an apprentice wood and ceramic floorer, he discovered he was good — fast enough to complete a day's work expectation by noon and driven to accept nothing but the straightest line and most precise design — the same innate qualities that would come to serve him in art.

One cold winter day 1990 — there's nothing like a cold winter day at the southern edge of Manhattan, he shudders — walking across a barren cityscape near the Battery, he decided he didn't want to do it anymore. He gave his tools to an apprentice and walked away.

"I've found in life, if you have a Plan B, it's generally where you wind up," he says.

That wasn't what he wanted.

He had been dabbling in painting in his free time, and he knew he wanted to go into book cover illustration. He didn't know how or what was involved, "but I figured if I put my mind to it, I could do it," he says.

He became an illustrator by sheer force of will.

Building on his love for books, he went to work designing and painting a lot of book covers, packaging, National Geographic puzzles and almost anything asked of him. He maniacally dived into 15-hour days, and being commissioned for more than 200 published works.

His skills and reputation within the illustration community earned him the honor of illustrating the cover of the Rolling Stones' 1997 album *Bridges to Babylon*.

Imagine his pride seeing his roaring lion standing on its hind legs when an 85-foot banner of his design unfurled from the Brooklyn Bridge as the iconic rock 'n' roll band announced its tour.

With that success, he transitioned into traditional portrait painting.

One of his family's first community events was the Fourth of July fireworks display where he met then-candidate Frank DelCore at a local Republican Club table. They held similar philosophies. Mr. DelCore invited Mr. Murphy to a GOP club meeting and gave him his card and mobile phone number. Coming from the Bronx, Mr. Murphy said was impressed of local government.

That connection led to a late November call from the mayor's office, asking if Mr. Murphy would like to join the township Cultural Arts Commission. The Township Committee envisioned a major expansion of its visual arts boosterism and engaged Mr. Murphy to see what he might be able offer.

On the commission, Mr. Murphy worked side by side with other artists and commission members to expand the township's annual art show, which now fills the municipal building's all-purpose rooms for a full weekend each spring.

Mr. Murphy brought professional artists to judge the works, talk to students, discuss their work and offers tips and advice to kids.

The show rekindled the idea to build an art gallery of local and state personalities. Mr. Murphy volunteered to paint the first portrait to set the tone and example. He chose Assemblyman Peter Biondi, a former mayor known as "Mr. Hillsborough," as his subject.

Mr. Murphy volunteered to train a student to paint the second portrait, which would earn the youngster his or her first commission of \$1,000, donated by Steve Linton of Armadillo Arts and Crafts. The best artists at the annual show were invited to sit and draw a complicated still life. The competition tested what students saw and how they interpreted it, and gave judges some notion of the students' ability to work under pressure.

Mr. Murphy's training is different from a college education, of which, for the most part, Mr. Murphy isn't a big fan. There is little technical education in most art curricula at the college level, and that's what you need to succeed in a career, he says.

"Great artists are not born, they are trained," he writes on his website.

Mr. Murphy's teaching is basic — perhaps like building from the ground up, in carpentry terms. He teaches students first how to hold a pencil, changing the way they perceive the tools with which they'll work.

Art becomes a matter of using the right edge with the right touch. He wants students to slow down, put quality ahead of pace and not be daunted by the whole of the project, but to consider its constituent parts. Once technical skills are accomplished, the artist can work to express his or her inner voice, he says.

"I'm relentless in pursuing perfection," he says. "I never leave behind a mark that can be improved upon. Every painting I do, I see room for growth. I cherish that challenge. The moment you stop learning, your work becomes stagnant and, frankly, not a lot of fun to create."

Art has an intrinsic value that can be measured in dollars, Mr. Murphy thinks. For one thing, Mr. Murphy's tutelage holds a certain 'return on investment' for students. His students have earned average college scholarships of about \$62,000 and have topped out at \$80,000.

Grace Cheung, an academy graduate now studying at Ringling College of Art and Design in Florida, has been chosen to paint a portrait of former Congressman and Secretary of Defense Leon Pannetta for the school, he says.

"This is a monumental achievement for a 20-year-old. These types of portraits are generally reserved for only the most successful professionals," Mr. Murphy says.

The value of Hillsborough's public art collection will only grow — the art market has outpaced stocks over the long run, Mr. Murphy says.



Murphy at work on the first portrait in the township gallery of Peter Biondi, a former mayor and sitting Assemblyman Murphy called "the epitome of Hillsborough." Biondi died in 2011.

And imagine the value of the collection if even one of the young artists strikes it big time, he says.

"You often hear of a starving artist. It doesn't have to be that way if you're trained," he says. "Most technically trained artists do just fine for themselves in the marketplace."

Patricia Fritz, the mother of Kathleen, a homeschooled Hillsborough resident, who was selected for the apprenticeship at age 16 in 2010, says Mr. Murphy taught her daughter foundational art skills, but also

business aspects.

"He said, 'don't treat art like a hobby,'" she says. "Treat it like a business."

She adds that Kathleen learned how to draw live models, conduct a photo shoot and be relaxed and mature around clients. Mr. Murphy introduced the family to the Portrait Society of America and all the contacts that would bring.

"It was a major turning point in her life," Ms. Fritz says. "During that year, she decided she wanted to be a full-time painter. It was very much life-changing for her." He adds that Kathleen has since formed her own LLC and completed a variety of portraits.

Mr. Murphy says it wasn't his plan to have a full-time job running a school, but he enjoys it nonetheless.

"I get such pleasure watching my students develop into skilled artists, and I don't take credit for their successes," he says.

His school is a small part of his overall income, he says, which mostly comes from private commissions, one connection leading to the next.

Enduring, valuable art is Mr. Murphy's contribution to his hometown, which he praises for its warm, homey, and personal feel.

"I got a great vibe from this Hillsborough every time my wife and I would visit a friend who lives here," he says. "It's a wonderful place to call home and I count myself fortunate to be able to contribute to what makes this one of the best towns in the country."

He believes in the age-old tradition of the master working with the next generation.

"In the end, for all of the labor to develop my abilities, I don't believe my knowledge and skills are mine," he says. "They're on loan. I get to use them while I'm here. If I don't share it, they die with me."