

HERSIDE'S

2014 Women of the Year

Painting Miracles

STORY & PHOTOS BY CATIE NOYES • EDITOR

“Everyone knows somebody who has lost a child,” said Robyn Holbert, nominator and dear friend to HerSide’s first Woman of the Year.

Thousands of children are diagnosed with cancer and thousands of children pass away due to cancer-related illnesses every year. Losing a child can be the most heartbreaking thing a parent has to deal with, especially when the last memories are of the child hooked up to a machine, fighting for life. How does one get passed that image and begin the healing process?

Patricia Krueger-Harding, a passionate artist from Sterling, Ohio, found herself at a crossroads. After losing her best friend to cancer, she became very frustrated with God.

“I lost my best girlfriend to ovarian cancer. For two years I stood by her side and helped her through it,” said Patricia. “She was a hairdresser and when she began to lose her own hair she wrapped it up in a turban. We used to joke about how she should just shave her head and I could paint on it. We would laugh for hours about it.”

“When she finally passed away, I had a hard time dealing with it. I kept asking God why her? Why do you have to take the good ones? I remember driving home and just banging on the steering wheel I was so upset,” she said. “Finally, I came to the realization that it’s not for us to know why.”

She tried to escape through her paintings, but she found herself struggling to find a true meaning for her work. “So next I asked God; you gave me this talent, what can I do with it?” Patricia heard, “Paint the children and paint them well.”

Not knowing what this meant, Patricia asked God, “what children?” Her answer was “St. Jude.” Patricia couldn’t believe what a huge undertaking that would be for one person so she shyed away from it at first.

Many opportunities came her way from 1991 to 2002 but Patricia continued to worry that she wouldn’t be good enough and feared that the families might not even like what she painted.

When she turned 50 in 2002, Patricia asked God, “Why haven’t I succeeded as an artist?” His response was very clear: “You didn’t paint the children.”

“You’re right, I’m ready,” she replied. “I know you won’t give me more than I can handle.”



It wasn't long after she had accepted her new path as an artist, when her phone rang. It was an unknown number and when Patricia answered it she heard, "I heard you want to paint the children." She couldn't believe her ears. God already had his plan in motion once Patricia accepted her new path.

The unknown number ended up being a contact for the Aladdin Foundation in Akron (very similar to the Make a Wish Foundation). The caller put her in touch with Akron Children's Hospital where she began her new career.

Background on Patricia:

Patricia grew up in the little town of Hinckley, Ohio, as the second oldest of seven children. She began painting when she was just 6 years old.

"My father worked with me and I drew with crayons," said Patricia. "He made me my first pallet."

She began by doing paint by number pictures, but grew tired of trying to find all the little numbers in the picture. "I told my dad, I want to paint," said Patricia.

The first picture she ever painted was an oil painting because of her dad. Later, she would take watercolor classes from Franklin Bates.

"He taught speed. The water color begins to turn to mud if you don't continue to play with it," she said. So Patricia found herself gravitating back to her oil based paints. She now uses a fast drying oil to give that life-like look to her portraits.

In high school, her art teacher, Beverly Melrose, encouraged her to keep up with her portraits. "She saw my ability to draw figures and drilled it into me," said Patricia.

When Patricia grew tired of drawing portraits she asked if she could try something else, but her teacher refused. When she finally broke down and let Patricia try her hand at pottery, her piece didn't quite turn out quite right. "'See,' she would tell me. 'That's why you should just stick with your portraits,'" said Patricia jokingly.

Patricia never went to college. She improved her skill through self-teaching methods and by following mentors. Her last mentor, Jim Seward, passed away just two years ago and Patricia can remember closely watching him as he

worked and trying to mimic his style. She remembers the day fondly when she was finally asked by Seward to help fix a painting he was working on. In that moment the mentor had become the mentee.

She met her first husband, Darrell Krueger, in high school and they found their dream home in Creston. Unfortunately, she was forced to give up her studio space in the home when her husband needed an office.

An old high school friend, John Harding, had a home in Sterling with an extra bedroom. He offered it to Patricia, but she often felt uncomfortable taking over his home and playing her music as she got lost in her paintings. Eventually she moved her studio to the basement of the home but vowed that she would someday work in the sunshine.

In 2006, her dream studio began to take shape. Friends and family came together and helped her to build her new studio from the ground up. She received lots of donations from locals who knew her story and wanted to give her a place where she could truly paint the children well.

"Lots of people have great big hearts," said Patricia. "I have a hard time accepting things from other people. I'm a giver."

In 2008 her dream studio was finished and Patricia took each little detail to heart. The hand-painted concrete floor resembles a real stone floor that fills the entire space. Upon entering the studio, you walk-in to an elegant gallery with deep purple walls covered with her large oil paintings.

Rounding the wall in the center of the room, you enter the studio space. Surrounded by her favorite paintings, Patricia's large easel and collection of paintbrushes sits to the right. An elegant seating area sits just to the left.

After her husband passed away, Patricia found love again in her dear friend John. They were married in April 2013.

It's been quite a journey for Patricia and she is grateful each day for the path she was given. "I love what I do," she said.

Patricia has been painting the children on her own since 2002. In 2010, with the help of her friend Robyn, she received her non-profit status for Faces of Angels.

"It really starts the healing process. It's amazing what she does," said Robyn.



“Darrell and I would just sit there and watch her work,” said John. “She gets totally involved in whatever painting she is working on. It’s amazing when she finishes a painting; how did she know, not only did that kid play guitar, but she managed to paint the exact guitar without knowing what it looked like.”

“Before I start any painting, I ask the person, how do you want people to remember you. Then I just wait for the answer,” said Patricia. “Eventually something just clicks and I know that’s what I need to paint.”

She paints the children well. No IV tubes, no tumors, not even a trace of sickness can be found in the bright smiling faces of the children she paints; even though the photos she is sent of the child reflects their illness.

“When a child is sick, the family is more concerned with getting them well again. They are not concerned with taking pictures,” said Patricia.

One mother asked upon receiving a portrait of her little girl, “How did you capture the spirit of my daughter but you never knew her?” Patricia had painted her sitting on a bench in a garden with her legs crossed — a trait that Patricia never knew about the girl.

She paints the children in settings that tell the story of the child even if she doesn’t know the whole story. “I paint what I feel,” she said.

Seeing the expressions on the faces of family members when they see the portrait for the first time is what really makes what Patricia does worthwhile. Sometimes there are no words as they just stare and touch, and even hug the

painting as if the child was actually there in front of them.

When she has completed a painting, she invites the family to her studio to pick the painting up or she goes to them and presents the painting to them absolutely free.

Patricia knows that she cannot paint all the children on her own and one day when she is gone she hopes that Faces of Angels will continue. Currently, the two sons of her late mentor, Jim Seward, work for her and while Patricia has no problem working for free, she knows she cannot expect other artists to work for free as well.

“I have a vision of artists stationed all over to reach out to different areas and paint the children,” said Patricia.

With the help of her friend, Robyn, they have pursued grants but have been unsuccessful so far. Patricia knows that God will provide in good time, and she has been incredibly thankful for any donations she does receive.

To learn more about Patricia’s non-profit, Faces of Angels, visit www.facesofangels.com.

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