

Local artists pay tribute to victims of massacre

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Ruby Pearl, a 58-year-old painter from Brookline, chose a candid snapshot to guide her portrait of Rachael Elizabeth Hill, an 18-year-old freshman killed in the spring in the Virginia Tech shootings. There were other photographs online of Hill, in which her hair and smile were just right. But Pearl was drawn to the more casual glimpse, the one that showed the mischievous glint in her eyes and kind smile across her face.

"She looked so alive, so young and full of life," Pearl said. "I thought that was the way she should be remembered."

Pearl's portrait of Hill was one of 32 portraits on display yesterday in the backyard of a Newton home in a poignant tribute to the victims of the massacre, the deadliest mass shooting in the country's history. Each portrait was painted by a different artist over the past few months.

The artists will send the portraits this week to Virginia Tech officials who plan to send them to the families of the victims.

The portraits, a mix of drawings and paintings in a range of styles, is the first artistic collection to depict each of the victims, the artists said. Artists said they hoped the artwork, based on photographs posted on the Internet, would honor the victims' memories and provide their loved ones with some comfort.

"They all capture the spirit of the person," said 42-year-old Sorin Bica of Framingham as he admired the exhibit. "They are so young, so happy, but that's all gone, so there's tremendous sadness."

Pearl said she had the idea for the project the day of the shootings as she watched the coverage on television. She went online and posted a request for artists to draw portraits of the victims. In a matter of hours, e-mails from artists from Massachusetts and beyond began pouring in.

"It was instantaneous," she said. "Seeing what happened, it killed my heart like everyone else. But I thought we had to do something. And I knew I wasn't alone."

Pearl chose to depict Hill because of their shared religious faith. At the bottom of the painting, Pearl wrote one of Hill's favorite passages from scripture, a line from Song of Solomon: "Who is this coming up from the wilderness, leaning upon her beloved?"

In painting her likeness, Pearl said, she grew to feel connected to Hill. "I almost felt she was blessing me," Pearl said.

Bica said he was proud to participate in the project and thankful that Pearl assigned him his subject -- Henry Lee, a 20-year-old computer engineering major remembered for his open smile and winning personality.

"How do you choose?" he asked rhetorically. "I was relieved."

Bica, who has been painting most of his life, said he tried to capture both Lee's zest for life and the tragedy of its sudden end.

Other portraits included Ross Alameddine, a 20-year-old from Saugus known for his charisma and wit, peering from the canvas with a roguish half-smile; Liviu Librescu, a 76-year-old Holocaust survivor from Romania who blocked the gunman to let his students escape; Matthew La Porte, an Air Force cadet who loved rock music and science-fiction novels, standing proud in his uniform in front of an American flag.

Renee Dumont, 46, of Blackstone, had some doubts about whether the project was worthwhile, but said it became the most gratifying experience of her life.

"Is this something that's going to make any difference?" she asked. "But if I'm one in a million wiping one tear, it's worth it."

She painted Leslie Sherman, 20, who had gone to New Orleans over Thanksgiving to help victims of Hurricane Katrina.

Dottie Doucette, a 72-year-old artist from Peabody, painted Parthai Lumbantoruan, a 34-year-old doctoral student in civil engineering. In his portrait, he appears dignified, looking straight ahead with just a hint of a smile.

"He was a kind, gentle person," Doucette said. "Everyone loved him, and said he wouldn't want people to mourn. I tried to capture that about him."

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