

LIFESTYLE

Faces of disability are strong and able

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Published 2:23 a.m. ET Sep. 20, 2020

NEW CASTLE – Eight faces welcome all who enter the Disability Options Network building on Harrison Avenue.

As part of Hoyt's ArtWorksHere program, 19-year-old Hannah Jones spent this summer creating an eight-portrait mural - "The Face of Disability" - on the façade of DON's Center for Independent Living building, formerly the Thaddeus Stevens primary school.

Artists Vincent Van Gogh and Frida Kahlo. Theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking and mathematician John Nash. Songwriter Stevie Wonder, author Agatha Christie and actress and model Jamie Brewer. All are famous, recognized for both their extreme talents and their disabilities.

The portrait of a smiling Edward V. Roberts might not be as easily recognizable. Roberts is an American disability rights activist. His work is at the core of DON, a consumer-driven nonprofit organization in western Pennsylvania that focuses on empowering people with disabilities.

"Ed Roberts fought for the rights of people with disabilities to leave institutions and live independently in their own community," Chris Lloyd, DON's executive director, said in a news release. "Our mission to empower people with disabilities to live as independently as they choose is built on the philosophy started by the father of the Independent Living Movement."

DON's mission is "Strong and Able." Begun in 2003, the nonprofit has provided advocacy, skill training, peer support and referral services to attendant care, home modifications and wellness activities. DON is now also interested in neighborhood

revitalization, downtown property rehabilitation and establishing community gardens.

”Their work is transformative,” Kimberly Koller-Jones, Hoyt’s executive director, said in the statement. “Not just for their clients but for the communities they live in – and that really appeals to me. Sometimes the best way you can serve the people is from outside your own walls.”

Thus when DON approached the Hoyt about funding a mural on the façade of their Harrison Avenue location, the Hoyt didn’t hesitate to entertain the proposal. DON needed to identify a local artist to complete the work in compliance with the criteria of the ArtWorksHere program, which until that point had considered applications from artists first.

“At the time, there was an issue with connecting artists to organizations and vice versa. We had just begun putting together a list of area artists to overcome this but did not have very many I wasn’t sure, but after consulting with the Art Committee, they said ‘yes.’”

“Mom wasn’t exactly easy on me though,” said Hannah Jones. “She wanted to be sure that if I was selected it was because I earned it. So I did everything needed and then some to work with DON on a proposal.”

Jones met with DON representatives to discuss a concept for the 6-foot by 38-foot façade. Initially, she said she was overwhelmed. She considered superheroes. But how would that fit into the neighborhood? While seated in her car, the idea jelled.

“It occurred to me as I was watching their clients coming and going that being a hero meant overcoming incredible odds. That’s what these people were doing.”

Jones spent a week researching famous people who are recognized for their disability and their talent, made a list that exuded the message that “there are no limits for any of us.” DON embraced the concept with one request - include Ed Roberts.

Hoyt funded the project in mid-July. Jones spent most evenings and weekends in August working on the mural. Each portrait is about 5-foot wide by 6-foot tall.

“Some days my mom worked with me to keep me company, make a suggestion, or help me solve a problem. We worked back and forth on pieces like she used to do with her mom. It was kind of rite of passage for me, “said Jones. The 2018 New Castle Senior High graduate is a junior majoring in biology at Hollins University in Roanoke, Va.

Past projects that grace the area are found in the stairwell of New Castle’s municipal parking garage, the east wall of the Lawrence County YMCA, and last year’s Hoyt funded garden sculpture for the lower east side community garden.

Artists and organizations interested in applying to the ArtWorksHere program to contact Koller-Jones at director@hoytartcenter.org.