

Detailed through oil and watercolor paintings, faces of wisdom and endurance fill Kingston of Ashland's sunroom.

Some stared boldly at the four artists who had descended upon the retirement facility throughout the year. Others seemed shy, resting their heads in their hands, seeming flattered and embarrassed by the attention.

Since January, artists Terri Meyer, Sharon Weaver, Karen Jennings and Jane Johnson have visited Kingston once or twice a month, capturing the likenesses of 12 residents from different angles during two- to three-hour sittings.

The artists installed their portraits at Kingston on Thursday, and the public is invited to see the exhibit Friday during a reception from 2-4 p.m. Visitors and residents can enjoy the artwork through Dec. 30.

The project served a two-fold purpose: the artists had available models and the residents had a rare chance to enjoy the limelight.

"I think they liked the social interaction and the attention because a lot of the people who worked there would walk by and say, 'Oh, that is so beautiful of you, they're doing such a nice job,'" Meyer said. "A lot of these people have a lot of illnesses, palsies and things like that, where you wouldn't think that they would be a really good subject to paint. And at first, I was like, 'I don't know how these are really going to turn out.' But I tell you what — you capture the inner beauty of these people in the paintings, and all of them turned out beautiful."

When Meyer operated her studio, Creative Chateau out of a historic 1860s barn in Ashland, a group of artists regularly got together to paint live models.

The problem was, the group met in the mornings when many would-be models weren't available.

The Creative Chateau has since become an online-only gallery, and Meyer was searching for a new project for the group involving live subjects.

"I just thought one day, 'You know, it would be nice to go to a nursing home, where there are people already there and bring some art into it,'" Meyer said.

Meyer contacted Anita Good, the activities director at Kingston, to discuss the idea further.

"I've always loved new and different things for the facility, to keep the residents involved in the community," Good said. "It's important to them. Just because they're older, they need to be part of the community and feel like they still have stuff to give. I think this was a wonderful project because they felt special."

Good gave Meyer a tour of the facility and Meyer decided the sunroom, with its windows and ample space, was the ideal spot for the portraits.

"It's great practice for us, having a live model," Meyer said. "It makes our skills so much better. You see in a year how much you've grown, just because you're working from life."

At first, many of the residents were hesitant to sign up. But once they saw their more intrepid peers' paintings, they were eager to have their own likenesses depicted.

"I think we all love painting people," Jennings said. "But this became a real pleasant surprise or treasure at the end when we got to know the residents."

Though the men weren't as keen on modeling during this first go-round, Weaver said one man has since asked to be a part of the project when the artists return next year.

"It's not that it was unexpected, but it was so nice and lovely getting to talk with them and seeing the excitement they had," Weaver said. "There was a waiting list to sign up for our poses."

The artists faced unique challenges in working with senior citizens. Due to various illnesses, some of them struggled to sit still for long periods, Meyer said. In those cases, the artists gave their subjects frequent breaks and would take reference photos, if needed.

The artists only used the photos as a last resort, to keep the depictions as natural as possible, Meyer said.

Meyer gave the prints to the residents as a thank-you gift for posing.

The experience benefitted the residents as much as the painters.

"While I sat there for the painting, people stopped by and watched it," resident Vesta Marlin said. "It was enjoyable to talk to visitors during that time. The painters knew their onions."

The social aspect of the project was as valuable as the art it produced.

"It's a very rich experience to be able to go in and make friends," Meyer said. "Every time I go in, I know all their names now. It's like a big family. And I guess I never realized what a nursing home was like until I went there, and it gave me a totally different perspective on the relationships. Because there's a lot of networking between people, there are friendships that develop and friendships with the staff. And it's really a nice community."

