

South Charlotte WEEKLY

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Foxcroft sculptor Cantey Kelleher photographs and measures her subjects to create figures known for their physical likenesses. The former psychologist does miniature and life-size sculptures, with children as her frequent subjects. SCW photo by Sean Busher.

Insider



After her first career as a psychologist, Cantey Kelleher of Foxcroft became a sculptor 18 years ago. She's done figures of men, women, children and pets and currently has a five-year waiting list. SCW photos by Sean Busher.

Immortalizing innocence

Foxcroft sculptor's creations capture more than physical likeness

By Lee McCracken

Cantey Kelleher's second career has captured not only her heart and soul but her time. While she could be enjoying retirement with her husband, John, she instead is finger-deep in clay.

Kelleher (formerly Cantey Gannaway) has been sculpting lifelike portraits for nearly 18 years and filling Charlotte homes with cherished works of art. Her miniature portrait figures capture the essence of each subject – man, woman, child or pet.

Twenty years after touring a sculpture garden in Charleston and taking her first classes at Queens College (now Queens

University), Kelleher is an accomplished portrait sculptor and teacher. "I stay very busy," she said. Indeed, she has a five-year waiting list.

A "people person" by nature, Kelleher's work has taken her from studying the mind – as a psychologist in the 1970s – to studying and sculpting the whole person. Her pieces are known for physical likeness, as well as revealing a person's character. "I always loved sketching, and I've always loved studying the human figure," she said.

Kelleher takes pride in her work with children, capturing them "just being themselves in natural, casual poses." For

hours, days and weeks, she pinches, presses and forms a mound of clay into a sweet girl with an upturned nose or a young boy whose eyes expose his hunger for knowledge.

Whether Kelleher's finished pieces make fathers cry or children squeal with delight, they almost always steal a moment's breath.

More scientific than creative

A Charlotte native, Kelleher and her husband live in the Foxcroft home where she raised her two children, Preston and Gray Gannaway. Her daughter, Preston, is a photojournalist and recently moved to Bangor, Me., from Santa Fe, N.M. Gray graduated this year from UNC-Asheville with a degree in music technology and moved to Portland, Ore., to "seek his fortune."

John, who is recently retired from Merrill Lynch, also has two grown children who live in Charlotte. Brendan, who is married and has two children, works at Merrill Lynch, and Faith is an attorney.

Kelleher attended Hollins College in Roanoke, Va., for two years before transferring to UNC, where she earned a

degree in psychology. She practiced for seven years before stopping to raise her children.

In the mid '80s, after she fell in love with sculpture in Charleston, Kelleher discovered an interest in working with clay. She enrolled in portrait sculpture classes at Queens, and in 1986 Kelleher was commissioned to do her first sculpture of a child.

"My first commission was \$200 – I was so nervous and so thrilled," she said. "Carol Joyner, who is a good friend and landscape designer, had seen my work and told someone she knew about it. Since then I have become known as one who sculpts children."

While she sculpts two-thirds to life-size portrait figures as garden pieces and fountains, what sets Kelleher apart are her miniature figure portraits. "Most sculptors do busts or they do life-size," she explained.

Although she works primarily with children, Kelleher has sculpted adults, including sports figures, such as Coach 'Bear' Bryant. "In the early '90s some businessmen hired me to do him and flew me

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Insider



Cantey Kelleher said children become invested in the sculpture and enjoy surprising a parent when the project is completed.

Sculptor

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down to the museum in Alabama.” She also sculpted NASCAR driver Davey Allison and his father before his death.

In 1990 she was awarded Best of Category and Best of Show from the N.C. State Ceramic Association. “I have stayed so busy doing commission work that I have not shown my work since then,” Kelleher said, noting that she sculpts and teaches because she’s passionate about the art, not the recognition.

“I’m not trying to grow my professional career – it’s something that I love, and it’s part of who I am.” Kelleher said her one wish is to have more time to do pieces for her own enjoyment. In fact, she’s beginning a bust of her own son.

“I’d love to do children in ballet and adults engaged in dance. I love the anatomy, the physiology,” Kelleher said.

“I see my art as more scientific than creative. I interpret what I see with a child, because I am trying to be very representational. It’s very disciplined – I’m working with calipers and taking measurements, and then I use a calculator to convert my measurements to the scale.

So it’s very mathematical.”

Kelleher said she’s very realistic with facial features and the body, but her style is “painterly” when it comes to clothing and accessories. “I do take some license in straightening teeth, shedding a few pounds or curling hair when requested,” she added.

“The longer I do it, the better I get – practice makes a big difference.”

Secret surprises

Kelleher enjoys both the mental aspect of studying photographs and making her pieces exact likenesses of her subjects and the handling of the clay. She also takes pleasure in making new friends.

“I love getting to know the children. It’s so much fun,” she said. “And the children enjoy it. The very young ones might be shy at first, but the teenagers really love it. One said, ‘That’s a mini me!’ when he saw his sculpture.”

Kelleher said most children become very invested in the sculpture and enjoy the fact that it will be a surprise for a parent. “It’s a project we work on together with some secrecy.”

She added, “And then, of course, I love

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Along with creating her own work, Cantey Kelleher teaches sculpture in her home on Abingdon Road in Foxcroft.

Sculptor

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running into my children years after I've done their portrait and seeing how they've grown and changed."

Kelleher meets with clients for 45 minutes to an hour at first, just talking and taking photographs from every angle. "I am sculpting the back of the head (or the body) as well as the front," she explained. She'll also measure her subjects and often use a video camera.

"I always have the parents involved when the piece is still wet for the final stages – I consider it teamwork," she said. "The way I see the child may not be the way the mother sees the child. I had one father say, 'That's my son, but that's not his ear.' So we had to tweak that."

Not only is it gratifying when a finished piece brings tears to a parent's eye but

also when the children see the portrait. "To see the children smile – the pride that they feel."

Miniature figures generally take one to two months to sculpt and then up to two months to cast. "I work in water-base clay – terra cotta – I like the way it feels. It takes a little while to dry it out and fire it." The finished pieces are shipped to a foundry in Colorado or New York City. Sculptures can be hand-cast in marble or bronze, which allows for inexpensive duplication of the original piece. "Most of my work is cast in bronze – a lot of parents want copies of castings for grandparents," Kelleher said.

"Robbie," sculpted in 1997, may be recognized because the piece is in the garden of a home that was on the Mint Museum tour this year. "Robbie is two-thirds life-size."

Kelleher's miniature figure portraits are



This 39-inch bronze garden fountain, called "Robbie," costs in the \$20,000 range.

in homes throughout the area, as well as across the country and overseas.

"Something Robbie's size would be in the \$20,000 range and the miniature figures in the \$4,000-\$7,000 range, so there's a lot more demand for them," she said.

Some parents ask for three or four children in one composition but usually decide against a connected composition. "One reason is that it would be very large and heavy. Another reason is they decide they want each child to have his or her own casting."

Students show off talent

Kelleher, who taught portrait sculpture at Queens in the mid '90s for several years, now teaches small classes of adults in her home studio.

Students in her 10-week sessions include retired business executives, attorneys, a hand surgeon, a physical therapist, a dental hygienist, homemakers and grandmothers. "I think my students really enjoy the class, but I learn so much from them, too."

Amy Sturkey, a physical therapist who has been studying under Kelleher for five years, said the classes are her own therapy. "She has a way with constructive comments – she always starts with how wonderful the piece is you are working on." And even when Kelleher suggests reworking a piece and starting over from scratch, Sturkey said, "You end up thinking it's a wonderful idea."

A number of her students have won awards and sold their work; one student has started her own business.

Wilton Parr has been studying under Kelleher since she began teaching. "He is so accomplished, and he's so generous

with his time," she said, noting Parr sculpted the figures in the atrium at Providence United Methodist Church.

"I have a waiting list for students, as well, since most sign up again from session to session. Some are working on their children or grandchildren and have been with me for years," she said. Kelleher added that she is not looking for more students, but she responds to inquiries on her Web site at www.cantey.net.

Kelleher's legacy goes beyond those who can afford to take her classes. Last

summer she taught a class at the Urban Ministry Center, and Kelleher proudly shows off photos of their work. "One of the girls was incredibly talented," she said.

Lawrence Cann at the Center accepted Kelleher's donation of the materials she left and has begun to teach his own classes in sculpture at the shelter.

Kelleher and six of her students are in Colorado this week at the country's largest outdoor sculpture show. The annual Loveland Sculpture Invitational features more than 300 artists from

across the nation displaying over 3,500 sculptures, from miniatures to monuments.

Sturkey said she feels blessed to know Kelleher as a person and a teacher. "Cantey is a magnificent person.... Just being around her makes me happy."

While Sturkey has learned that "pictures, pictures, pictures" and having a subject in 360 degrees are important for portrait sculpture, the most important lesson Kelleher has taught her is "if you don't have the eyes, you don't have the person." □