

Talent beyond his years: Ballenger paints murals of veterans

Written by Melinda Russell Sun Correspondent
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Greg Ballenger is an 18-year-old artist who dreams of showing in a gallery in Santa Fe soon and New York City later. He is the guy seen on scaffolding painting black and white portraits of veterans in downtown Gallup.

So far, he has completed a mural for Sheila Silva on Second Street and one for Tom Hartsock in the downtown walkway.

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Ballenger attended Rehoboth Christian School. He left Rehoboth after his sophomore year for Idyllwild Arts Academy in California. Idyllwild is a boarding school for aspiring artists. By completing his studies there he received a high school diploma and an art certificate.

One of the requirements to receive the art certificate was completion of a senior show. He searched for a subject, but had trouble making a decision. He takes an introspective approach to life.

He explained to his mother, Virginia Ballenger, that finding a subject to express his artistic creativity was difficult. She told him, if you have trouble doing it for yourself, then do it for someone else. She suggested he use subjects from Gallup and focus on something that would showcase his culture. He was one of only three Native students on the campus, so this seemed like a good idea.

While growing up, Ballenger had wanted to join the Marines. But art ended up being his choice of a vocation. He combined his two passions and chose veterans as the subject of his senior show. The project included several months of work on the art, hanging the show, hosting an opening, taking down the show and receiving a critique.

Ballenger's father, Carl, showed the senior project to local artist Fitz Sargent. Sargent encouraged the younger Ballenger to present his work to Mayor Jackie McKinney.

McKinney saw the mural Ballenger painted on the wall of Sargent's home across from Camille's on Second Street and thought it was well done. Since the theme fit in with the "Most Patriotic Small Town in America" designation Gallup received during a Rand McNally Best of the Road contest in 2013.

"It's just amazing. It goes hand-in-hand with the quality of artists in our area," he said.

The mayor dedicated \$5,000 from his discretionary fund account, allocated to him from the city

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to commission the project.

The mayor also said that he is happy to recognize young talent and is excited about leaving a lasting memorial to local veterans.

Sargent gave further encouragement by showing Ballenger how to prep the wall and get the right composition for the piece.

“What sets him apart is he is really serious,” Sargent said. “And he’s good. He’s just natural good, a perfectionist.”

Ballenger said he is having a lot of fun with the project. But it is hard work. It takes him almost an hour to set up his scaffolding when he works alone. Sometimes a friend will come help him set up. A lot of people stop to watch him work.

A guy named “Taco” hangs around downtown and seems to show up when Ballenger needs an inspiring boost.

“He’s really been an encouragement to me,” he said.

The first portrait completed features Sgt. Sheila Silva, U.S. Marine Corps. Silva served from 1985-1992 and was stationed in Saudi Arabia for both Operation Desert Shield and Operation Desert Storm.

“My daughters love it,” she said. “They think it’s cool.”

Her father is also a veteran and he is also proud of the portrait.

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But Silva has mixed feelings about it. While she thinks it's a great idea, she doesn't like to be in the "limelight."

There will be a quote painted close to each portrait. Hartsock's quote will read: "Love, Honor, and Duty to America! Thirty months in Vietnam was a small price to pay for the privilege of being born in the U.S.A." He served in the US Army from 1967-1971 with the 509th Radio Research Company.

Members of Veterans Helping Veterans is suggesting the subjects for the murals. "It's hard to pick who goes on the wall. You can only do so many," volunteer David Cuellar said.

Ballenger hopes to complete four more portraits before Aug. 7, which is the date for next month's Arts Crawl event.

In addition to painting, Ballenger is interested in all artistic mediums including jewelry making, photography, sculpture and printmaking. His motto is "Work Until Your Idols Become Your Rivals". He will be attending the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe this fall working toward a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree.

He hopes travel and live in Europe and South America so he can experience different cultures and the art of other countries.