



Art is her gift

By Tim Ellsworth

Ever since she was a little girl, Kelly O'Neill was creative. She'd cut. She'd glue. She'd scribble.

"Anything that I could put my hands on became an art project," she says.

That love for art has persisted all through O'Neill's life. Though many tried to steer her away from her passion and encouraged her to get a "real" job, O'Neill didn't listen, maintaining a singular focus on her dreams of becoming an artist.

She pledged to live frugally and within her means – that meant no eating out, no movies, no vacations. Whatever it would take to succeed as an artist, the 2001 Union graduate was willing to do it.

That perseverance has paid huge dividends for O'Neill, now a successful artist in Brentwood, Tenn. In recent months, her work has been featured on NBC's "Today" show and on ABC's "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition."

"I wanted to wake up and do what I loved every day," O'Neill says. "And I'm still doing it."

A native of Milan, Tenn., O'Neill (which is her middle name. Her maiden name was Carter, and her legal, married name is Kelly Bailey) focused her artistic passions on food during her high school years at Jackson Christian School. She had dreams to become a culinary artist, working in a fancy hotel making beautiful desserts that look like sculptures.

She began applying to culinary schools, but realized about six months before the school year's start that she wasn't eligible for entrance in such schools – since she was only 17, and you had to be 18 to attend culinary school.

Her sister, Shannon Carter, was attending Union, and O'Neill decided to attend as well. At first, she planned to be at Union for a year and then move on to a culinary school. But she says the Lord had other plans for her.

"I always refer to it as closed doors and opened windows," O'Neill says. "God just directed my path into the art department at Union. I realized then that food was just one outlet of creativity, and that the real passion for me was creating in general."

She began taking preliminary art classes at Union and enjoyed them. She discovered that she loved drawing people, which surprised her since she had never done it before. It became clear to O'Neill that drawing people was her greatest talent.

Others noticed her ability. While she worked on projects for class, people would come to the studio and ask her if she could draw pictures of their kids.

"I think I sold my first portrait for like \$15 to another art student," she says.

Her education at Union provided her with a valuable "well-roundedness," and she says learning from art professor Lee Benson was a special blessing.

"Being under Mr. Benson's teaching was the most inspiring thing that I could imagine," O'Neill says. "He was so focused on the students doing what they were

passionate about. I think I became a much more creative artist during his classes, because I wasn't copying something that I was looking at. I was creating something literally from the earth."

Her portrait business began even during her time at Union, thanks largely to encouragement from her dad. She created flyers and sent them to several of her parents' friends who had children.

"I started them at \$50 apiece," she said.

After graduating, O'Neill was determined to forge out a career as a freelance artist.

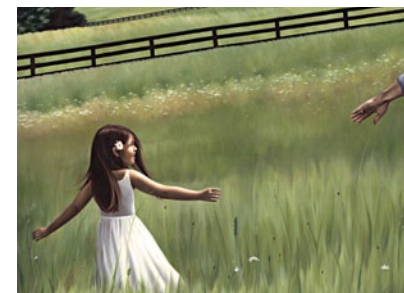
"I had heard so many stories about people who had a passion for something and didn't really believe that they could make it," O'Neill says.

"They ended up getting what they thought would be a temporary 'real job' and never getting out of it."

Such a life was not for her. She moved to the Nashville area in 2002, which offered greater opportunities for success as an artist. She married her husband Nate in 2008, and had a baby girl in December.

Her big break came in April 2010, when O'Neill got a call from a producer at the "Today" show. He had seen a video that O'Neill had posted on YouTube – a rapidly accelerated version of her drawing a complete portrait of Ellen Degeneres.

"He was looking for a creative way to



introduce their summer concert series that they do every year," O'Neill says. "He didn't want to just have an announcer give off the names. So he thought a speed drawing would be great."

He asked O'Neill if she would be willing to give it a shot for the show.

"The thing is," he told her, "we need it in three days."

"Three days turned into less than two," O'Neill said. "They moved it up a morning. I was in my first trimester of pregnancy at this point, and I generally didn't have a lot of energy. And I thought, 'This is going to be interesting, but I'm going to give it a shot.'"

O'Neill canceled everything on her schedule for the next couple of days. Her husband took two days off work to stay home and help her. After finding most of the logos for artists such as James Taylor, Justin Bieber, Lady Gaga, John Mayer, Katy Perry, Carrie Underwood and others, O'Neill began drawing them for about 12 straight hours. A video camera attached to a lamp above her captured her work.

Upon completing the project, O'Neill had to send NBC the huge video files. She had a few transmission problems, but finally got the last file sent about three hours before the show aired.

She and her husband went to bed at 5 a.m. and watched the recorded program when they awoke a few hours later. A poster containing all the logos O'Neill had drawn was on display next to Meredith Viera, Matt Lauer and Al Roker as they stood in Rockefeller Center.

"It was really cool to see my arm, to start with," O'Neill recalls.

Lauer mentioned O'Neill's name on the program, and a few months later, the "Today" show ran a follow-up video interview with her. Since then, O'Neill had an opportunity to work with "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition." The program helped to rebuild Lighthouse Christian School, which was heavily damaged in the May 2010 flood, and enlisted O'Neill to design three different "storefronts" that serve as a backdrop to a play area called "Trike Town."

Such high-profile opportunities are nice, but O'Neill gets more excited



"Unblemished" by Kelly O'Neill

talking about her paintings than anything else. She uses many of her paintings to communicate a biblical truth. Her painting "Unblemished" shows an elderly man hugging a lamb – an image that O'Neill used to represent the relationship between God the Father and God the Son. Another painting, "Mine For a Moment," portrays the fragility and unpredictability of life and the sovereignty of God who holds all life in his hands.

"I would maybe be reading something in the Bible, or I would be in a church service, and I would get an image of something in my mind that I knew wasn't from me," she says. "Those paintings are the ones that have made the most impact on people. I've had people just cry in front of some of these and get healing from something in their life that maybe they've been struggling with for a while."

For O'Neill, art is her gift – a talent that God has given her, and a gift that she wants to use to bless the lives of others.

"Any shred of talent that I have, God's given me for a reason," O'Neill says.

"Whether I'm using it to just do a portrait of someone's child or to create a painting that might impact a generation to come, I feel like to do it with excellence is almost my tithe of that gift. I don't ever want to lose sight of that." 🙏