

Sandy Springs artist paints portraits of fallen U. S. soldiers for families

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Immediately following the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States a steady influx of recruits signed up to defend our country.

Among them was Army Spc. Justin W. Johnson, 22.

As of May 31, the war on terror has claimed the lives of 102 Georgia soldiers and nearly 3,500 nationwide.

Among them was Johnson.

In an effort to pay tribute to Johnson, the first and only soldier from Rome to lose his life, Sandy Springs resident and award-winning artist Leah Henry painted his portrait through Art from the Heart, a project in which artists paint portraits of fallen soldiers from across the state.

The program pairs more than 50 artists with families who have lost a loved one in Iraq or Afghanistan, and Ms. Henry said inspiration to complete the portraits, which take about a month each, comes from the strength of the families.

"I have painted two soldiers' portraits and seeing the tears of appreciation in the families' eyes gives me a feeling of knowing I have done something good," Ms. Henry said.

Johnson's mother Jan said she was "spellbound" by Ms. Henry's portrait of her son.

"This portrait is something we will always cherish," said Ms. Johnson, who resides in Lyerly, a few minutes from Rome, with her husband Joe. "She brought him to life. It makes you think he's staring right back at you."

She believes Art from the Heart is a good way to remember the sacrifices made by soldiers who are fighting for our country in the current war and past conflicts.

"It's because of people like Justin that we are able to have the freedom that we enjoy today," Ms. Johnson said. "Not just the ones who have fallen, but all of them."

Art from the Heart is sponsored by The Atlanta Fine Arts League, an organization co-founded by Ms. Henry in 2005.

"We formed the league because we, as artists, wanted to make a difference to other artists and the community at large in our own unique way," she said.

Henry also has painted a portrait of Army Sgt. Kevin Akins, 29, for his parents, Kay and Don Akins, of Oglethorpe, a town south of Macon.

"We learn a lot about the soldiers through their family," Ms. Henry said, "so it feels like the soldier is sitting there with you while you're painting and you want to make sure that it's just right."

Information: visit www.leahhenry.com, www.atlantafinearts.org or www.fallenheroesmemorial.com

