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ENTERTAINMENT

Artists Among Us: Dog portraits more than cute furry faces

Breslau artist celebrates the wonder of man's best friend in exhibit at Kitchener Public Library

By **Valerie Hill** Special to the Record

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KITCHENER - When Jacqueline Gori prepares to paint a dog's portrait, she needs to first understand that dog's personality, its quirks and unique traits.

To achieve such intimacy, Gori spends time with the dog, on its home turf, watches as it interacts with its owners, then takes photos. Lots of photos. If she is asked to create a memorial portrait, she instead interviews the owners about the dog, then looks at photos.

It's the interviews that give her insight, but looking into the eyes of the dog provides a view into its heart. That's what makes her images seem so real.

"I'm very particular about the photos," said the Breslau artist whose exhibit, *When Passions Collide: Dog Portraits* by Jacqueline Gori, is in the lower gallery at Kitchener Public Library, Queen Street branch, until July 31.

The 41 portraits are done in four mediums: acrylic, watercolour, graphite and photography. Most of the images have appeared in fundraising books, starting with "In Service: Portraits of Dogs that Change Lives" for the National Service Dogs in Cambridge, authored by Nancy Silcox.

The next book came in 2018, "Workin' Like a Dog; Doin' Nuthin' Like a Cat: Canadian Pets Who Go to the Office," also written by Silcox with funds donated to Kali's Wish, a charity that supports families of pets going through cancer treatment. The book included an etching of Midi, singer Jann Arden's dog, and the portrait is included the library exhibit. Gori's next book, "I love Labs," is set for an October release and will raise money for a service dog for someone in need.

With her interest in service dogs of all stripes, it's not surprising that this exhibit of dog portraits is not just about the cuddly canines.

The South African-born Gori is candid about her mental-health issues, a result of a sexual assault that left her with severe post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). She uses a service dog, a four-year-old Labrador named Samson, to navigate day-to-day life.

She knows the difference a dog can make. Samson, her second service dog and one she trained herself, has had a major impact on her life. If he senses the smallest change in her, the dog will react, even smelling her breath, which can be an indication she is under stress.

Once, when the memories of the attack flooded back, Gori said she went to the kitchen and pulled out a knife, ready to harm herself, seeking a way to redirect her thoughts, to stop the memory. Within seconds, Samson was on top of her, licking her face and wrists while creating a comforting weight that snapped her back into the present.

"He sees how I look when I zone out," she said. "It's dissociation. When he sees me doing that, he comes to me (as if saying) 'knock it off.'"

The dog is always watching, ready to react in a split second.

Gori has lived with the trauma-caused illness for years, experienced recurring thoughts of suicide and self-harm, and it's always Samson that brings her back from those dark depths. She wanted to celebrate dogs such as Samson, dogs who support their owners as guide dogs for the visually impaired, police service dogs, autism- and PTSD-support dogs, diabetic- and seizure-alert dogs. There are dogs used in courts, schools and social service agencies to calm traumatized children.

It seems canines and their natural affinity to protect and help humans means they can be trained for a myriad of support services, and Gori wanted to capture on canvas what makes these animals special.

Each image in the show is attached to a card with the dog's name and history, as well as a QR code that, when scanned, provides an audio recording. Gori said this addition was inspired by friends who have visual impairments and who might not otherwise think to come to an art exhibit.

Gori is a self-trained artist who runs Ontario Art School from her home in Breslau. She came to Canada in 2008 from England with her husband, where they had lived for 12 years. She had been working in technology but, after a bout of a rare strain of tuberculosis in 2003 put her in a wheelchair for five years, she could not return to her former job. She found an alternative.

"I pursued my first love: art," she said, joking that she was born with brushes for fingers.

The images in the library exhibit of working dogs and pets are past works, mostly commissions that are on loan from the owners. None are for sale. This exhibit, she said, is about getting people to understand the roles these dogs play in our lives, particularly for vulnerable people, and she hopes it will open a dialogue about mental illness.

"I want to talk about it, I want to eradicate the stigma, I want people to know there's hope," she said.

"When Passions Collide: Dog Portraits by Jacqueline Gori"

Kitchener Public Library, Queen Street branch

Lower gallery, until July 31

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