

Home, again

White Plains artist helps Katrina families reclaim a piece of their past



Kay Kennedy Regimbal

Rebekah Kennedy, now 17, looks over the remains of her family's home in Bay St. Louis, Miss., in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005.



Kay Kennedy Regimbal

Kay Kennedy Regimbal worked from memory and snapshots to create this sketch of her childhood home, which she sent to artist Susan Stillman.



Susan Stillman

Based on the sketch by Regimbal, Stillman created this sketch of the Kennedy home, the basis for her painting.



Stillman's finished painting of the Kennedy home, presented as a Christmas gift to Basil and Weezie Kennedy.

Stillman

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usan Stillman, like most, was horrified watching the reports of Hurricane Katrina last year. The White Plains artist, having no link to the South, also felt helpless.

So, she did what she could.

"You know, you send a check and ...," she says with a slight shrug.

Within weeks, though, Stillman would be drawn into the heart of the storm's wake.

An e-mail query from Kay Kennedy Regimbal of Oxford, Miss., arrived in early October, starting a process that Stillman will never forget.

"I got it," she says. "I opened it. It was at night. It wasn't the 'Please send me your prices,' the stuff I usually get. ... It just knocked me right out."

Regimbal, eloquently and humbly, was asking Stillman to consider painting a portrait of the Kennedy family home that stood no more.

Right away, Stillman knew her next commission would be different. Very different.

Since 1989, Stillman has run a company called Home Portraits. She usually works from a combination of sketches, photographs and on-site visits to capture a home's essence in a painting.

Most often, her work is presented to mark a special occasion, from the purchase of a new home to a 50th wedding anniversary.

Now, Stillman was being asked to commemorate something that existed only in memory.

She didn't hesitate.

"I thought 'OK, finally, there's something I can do that's not so disconnected,'" she says.

It turned out that Kennedy Regimbal wanted the portrait for her parents, Basil and Weezie Kennedy. They were devastated by the loss of the beachfront home in Bay St. Louis, Miss., one the family had called home since 1974. It was nearly 100 years old. Its yard was dotted with magnolias planted in honor of Kay's birth, and then of her sister, Rebekah. Kay's parents and sister had evacuated, for the first time,



Mark Vergari/The Journal News

Susan Stillman in her home studio in White Plains, where she operates her business, Home Portraits. Stillman takes photographs of people's homes and turns them into painted pieces of art. She recently worked on two homes of Hurricane Katrina victims.

Helping families reclaim their past

STILLMAN, from 1D

and returned to rubble.

"There is nothing like when you set foot on that property," Kennedy Regimbal says of her first visit back to her childhood home. "It was gone."

Soon, she was looking for a way to help her parents deal with their loss.

"I came across Susan's Web site and her style and everything she had there was exactly what we were looking for," Kennedy Regimbal says.

All she could offer Stillman was a lifetime of memories and the few insurance photographs taken right before the storm.

"It was really hard to figure out what it looked like," Stillman says.

But between some humble sketches from Kennedy Regimbal ("I am no artist and don't even pretend to be an artist") and a steady back-and-forth between the women, a picture emerged.

"(Stillman) would ask kind of pointed questions, to kind of get a response: 'Was it more like this or like this?'" Kennedy Regimbal says.

But Stillman knew a true picture included more than asking about about windows and doorways.

"A house is many years in the making," Stillman says.

Stillman drew deep on her experience. The artist, who has a degree in fine arts from the Rhode Island School of Design and a master's of fine arts from Brook-

For more info

Visit Susan Stillman, and see a portfolio of her work, at her Web site, www.ehomeportraits.com, or call 914-682-3771.

lyn College, has been a faculty member of the Parsons School of Design since 1983. Her work has been published in magazines, newspapers, posters and books.

And while working on the painting, for which she charged less than her usual fee, Stillman sensed the magnitude of the project.

"It was so nice to be able to do something that meant so much to her," Stillman says. "This one felt like we were making friends forever. I want them to come up and visit."

Finally, after weeks of work, the 11-by-14-inch acrylic painting was shipped in time for a Christmas presentation.

"It was an absolute, complete, total surprise," says Basil Kennedy. "And we cried for a long time. It really hit us between the eyes."

He remains amazed at Stillman's accuracy, from the correct size and number of "little bitty" windows to his beloved decorative cannon taking pride of place on the front patio.

"It means so much to us," he says.

Kennedy Regimbal can't thank Stillman enough.

"She was able to give them something they were never going to be able to get back any other way ... It's the closest thing to a family heirloom we will ever have, at this point in time."

Today, her parents and sister, now 17, live in a garage apartment on the property, with Basil Kennedy talking of one day rebuilding.

But Stillman's Katrina connection didn't end there.

A second portrait has become part of another Mississippi family's recovery.

Toni Ganucheau of Biloxi, a colleague of Basil Kennedy's at The Peoples Bank, saw Stillman's work.

"I went, 'Oh my gosh,' because I knew his home had been destroyed," Ganucheau says. "I was so emotional at that point, and I said, 'Do you think she could possibly do my house?'"

Soon, she and Stillman were working from photographs Ganucheau and her husband, Gene, had snapped in their final hours there.

"I didn't have to do too much imagining," Stillman says. "It was all there."

Ganucheau's home may have been simpler in stature than the Kennedy property, but it was filled with just as many memories.

"My home had been my home for 30 years," she says. "I brought both my boys home from the hospital there. I fought cancer there. ... That was my 'landing.'"

And even though the

Ganucheaus found a new home across town — after living in the bank for about a month — Toni Ganucheau had a recurring thought.

"I just have this empty feeling, and I don't know how to describe it," she says.

Then, Ganucheau was discussing the topic with someone from New Orleans she met at a businesswomen's meeting.

"She said, 'You've lost your history,' and I just looked at her and I said, 'You're absolutely right.'"

While Ganucheau indeed had a new home, new furniture and new appliances, things like the baby pictures of two grown sons were gone.

But over time, Ganucheau says, she's been making peace with what happened.

"We have to move forward," she says. "We're very blessed."

And her painting has given her a tangible link to the past she'll never forget. Its arrival was equally memorable.

"I just broke down at my desk," Ganucheau says. "Everyone kind of crowded around and looked at it. ... It's just going to be something I'm going to cherish for the rest of my life."

For now, it's being framed.

"They asked me how much it was worth and I said, 'It's worth at least a million dollars.'"

For Stillman, it's the appraisal of a lifetime.

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