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ALERT TOP STORY

Carved connections: Faces of Flagstaff aims to celebrate community identity with philanthropic art show

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Flagstaff artist Eric Kruse stands in his garage studio surrounded by samples of his wood carved portraiture. Kruse will be unveiling his latest project "Faces of Flagstaff" Friday July 28 at the historic Ice House.

Jake Bacon, Arizona Daily Sun



Eric Kruse's studio is filled with faces -- faces rendered in wood.

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Kruse interrupts the surface of reclaimed planks, carving highlights, lines and shadows, using the natural character of wood to reproduce the characteristics of animals, trees and human expressions.

Many of the faces that appear on the walls of Kruse's studio can be identified at a glance. He's reproduced images of Mother Teresa, Elvis Costello, the Mona Lisa and Mahatma Gandhi.

Some of the faces appearing in carved portraits in Kruse's studio this month are only familiar to folks in Flagstaff.

Kruse, the owner of Signed in Wood Studio, is currently working on a series of portraits for a show titled "Faces of Flagstaff." It's set to open on Friday, July 28, at the Historic Ice House Downtown.

Before life took Kruse to Phoenix for 17 years, he lived in Northern California. On a trip to the coast, Kruse couldn't help but snap photos of the trees he saw.

One area, in particular, was lined with oak trees.

"I took a massive amount of pictures that weekend. When I got back, I was like, 'I've got to do something with this,'" Kruse said.

Do something he did.

The branches of Kruse's family tree are laden with woodworkers. Today, some of their tools have places of honor in his home studio.

"Both my grandfather and my father are woodworkers. I spent a lot of time in their shop kind of playing around or helping them and learning the tools," Kruse said.

"Many years later I picked it up and started carving. I really wanted to find a way to use recycled wood that you see and people pick up on the side of the street and whatever. I started collecting wood and started carving into it."

He was particularly fascinated with the router. Using that tool, freehand, Kruse remade a photo of those California oak trees on a piece of wood.

At the time, a friend of Kruse's son took one look at the carving and asked if he could order one for himself. Kruse's journey as carver and artist began right then and there -- with the silhouette of a tree.

Since then, his skills have grown. The same tree silhouettes he carves with diligence and attention to detail are mirrored in ink on his arms. The woodworker's tattoos suggest his love of the sylvan — and that love of forests and trees is part of what drew him away from the scorching heat of his former home in Phoenix.

Kruse moved to Flagstaff three years ago. It didn't take long before the artist was taken with the region's signature landscape.

“Since moving up here to Flagstaff, I fell in love with the ponderosas and the Peaks,” Kruse said.

He worked on carving out a new home in a landscape he loved, buying a home and establishing a studio.

Then Kruse decided he needed to put down roots in the community, too, by connecting with locals.

“I started to think about how I could integrate into the community and started to learn about different people, different things. I came up with the idea for Faces of Flagstaff as a way to learn about Flagstaff,” Kruse said. “There's a lot of unsung heroes here. I wanted to reach out to these personalities and see if I could make their portraits.”

Kruse had become confident in portraiture as well as free-hand silhouette carving. He said commission pieces and portraits have allowed him to spend quality time with people and get to know them.

With Faces of Flagstaff, he hopes to get to know the community in a similar way, by first carving the visages of notable people in the region.

Deepening the connection

Because connection was the point of his Faces of Flagstaff series, he said it made sense to partner with a small local nonprofit to show the final products.



Flagstaff Artist Eric Kruse records an interview to promote his upcoming art exhibit. Kruse will be unveiling his latest project “Faces of Flagstaff” Friday July 28 at the historic Ice House. The project features portraits of Flagstaff community members carved into wooden panels.

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Enter Culture Connection AZ.

“I think what Culture Connection does and does really well is connect people of different cultures, backgrounds and lived experiences,” said Audra Travelbee, the founder and executive director of Culture Connection AZ. “All of our programs are designed not just to highlight people from other cultures, but to facilitate that

connection between local folks and folks that come from other countries or come from another part of the country here -- to facilitate that exchange of cultural information. Being able to share an experience that's different from your own broadens your perspective and your worldview. I think that leads to a lot more empathy and compassion in the community."

Located in the Historic Ice House, Culture Connection often offers new artists a place to start.

The nonprofit is on the Downtown Business Alliance's First Friday Artwalk map. Travelbee aims to use that visibility to bring awareness to creators who are just beginning their journey in the art world.

"We try to keep it really accessible," Travelbee said. "I know sometimes it can be a challenge for artists to find opportunities that aren't cost prohibitive. Frequently there's an expectation that they'll pay a commission. That can be up to 40% of sales sometimes. Sometimes entry fees for galleries can be really pricey, too. What we do is offer an opportunity that's very low cost and low financial risk."

According to Travelbee, artists pay just \$20 to set up a table at the Ice House during First Friday Artwalk. If they can't pay the \$20, artists can volunteer for other Culture Connection projects instead.

"It really encourages new artists, and I really enjoy when someone reaches out to me and they're like, 'I've never done a show before. I'd like to do a show, but also I'm really nervous or I'm not sure what to do.' It's really cool that we get to offer that space that's welcoming and supportive," Travelbee said. "A lot of times I'll have them sit next to a more experienced artist so they can get that mentorship aspect of it, too. I always take a picture of them with a little sign that says 'first show' and then I put it on our social media to give them that encouragement. I personally find that really rewarding."

When Kruse approached Travelbee about Faces of Flagstaff, the two decided they didn't just want to show the art in the Ice House gallery space. They wanted to use the show to raise money for Culture Connection, and to highlight the work and

personalities of the people who shape the community as a whole.

“One of the things I really love about this particular show that we’re doing is it really offers the opportunity to celebrate those unsung heroes in Flagstaff. I know a lot of folks are behind the scenes doing tons of community work and really spending a lot of time investing in Flagstaff,” Travelbee said.

Admission to the show will be free, with a suggested \$10 donation at the door. The portraits will be sold, there will be a silent auction and beverages can be purchased to benefit Travelbee’s nonprofit.

“It’s tough to be a startup nonprofit in Flagstaff. There are over 600 nonprofit organizations in Flagstaff. When you’re new on the scene, it is sort of a challenge to get people to pay attention and really understand what you’re doing. There’s definitely limited funding opportunities in Flagstaff,” Travelbee said. “I think the thing that makes the biggest impact is when people donate directly to the organization.”

She said for a nonprofit of her size, smaller donations can really count. When Culture Connection is not hosting shows for First Friday, it hosts Spanish/English language groups and a program called Culture Kitchen, which offers neighbors opportunities to share recipes from their cultures of origin with the community at large.



Portraits of Earnest Hemmingway and Mother Theresa sit in the studio of Flagstaff Artist Eric Kruse. Kruse will be unveiling his latest project “Faces of Flagstaff” Friday July 28 at the historic Ice House. The project features portraits of Flagstaff community members carved into wooden panels.

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A face to the name

For Kruse, the show is a way to get involved and give back.

It’s also all about highlighting the people who will be featured — the faces of Flagstaff.

Casting their nets for a crew of prominent people, Travelbee and Kruse set up an online nomination form and invited folks across Flagstaff to nominate their friends, neighbors and colleagues.

They received more than 15 nominations -- which Travelbee said was promising for a new event and concept.

Culture Connection then partnered with Kruse to form a small committee that narrowed those 15 nominations down to three.

Kruse hopes Faces of Flagstaff will become an annual show and fundraiser. For the first year, he has picked a couple of additional honorees to fill the gallery space.

Right now, Kruse and Travelbee are keeping the names of the honorees close to the vest, but they’re looking forward to revealing the finished art during opening night on July 28. Most of the honorees will be in attendance.

“We’ve set it up to be really welcoming. A good old Flagstaff time, with music and everything. I’m excited,” Travelbee said.

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Tags

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