

Cover Story

Capturing a governor on canvas

Artist Carlene Deon has painted two official portraits of former Gov. Mark Schweiker.

By Erica S. Brath
FOR THE INQUIRER

It is rare for artists to see their work entered into visual history in their lifetime. Bucks County painter Carlene Deon not only has accomplished that, she also has done it twice.

Deon painted the official portrait of former Gov. Mark Schweiker. The painting was unveiled at a ceremony Oct. 4 at the Capitol and will hang among 55 other official governors' portraits in Harrisburg.

She also painted Schweiker's likeness during his term as lieutenant governor. That painting was hung in the lieutenant governor's office Nov. 16.

The choice of who would paint his likeness was relatively easy for Schweiker, a friend of Deon's.

"Having personal rapport was key," says Schweiker, who is also a neighbor, which would seemingly make the task of sitting for hours in front of an easel easier to accomplish.

Unfortunately for him, finding time to pose was not so simple.

"Most people will tell you, 'Mark's not a portrait kind of guy,'" Schweiker says. "One doesn't produce a portrait overnight. It's literally months in the making."

Deon, he says, is "an excellent artist, and I don't mean only in the pictorial sense. She's thoughtful, dedicated, and I know put in plenty of hours."

It usually takes Deon more than 100 hours to complete a painting, including multiple sessions to decide on details ranging from facial expression to background imagery.

In Schweiker's case, those

ON THE COVER

Carlene Deon with some of her work. The portrait at left is of son P.T. Deon. Inquirer photograph by April Saul.



APRIL SAUL / Inquirer Staff Photographer

Two still-life oil paintings of fruit by Carlene Deon, photographed at her home.

meetings led to a clear idea of the end result. In the portrait, he is standing in front of a desk with nothing in the background.

"What I tried to portray in his eyes was his warmth and confidence, along with his friendly approachability and his strength," Deon says.

While the mother of two, who resides in Middletown, acknowledges that taking care of her family is her first career, a passion for painting drives her when she is in her studio.

Her skill comes from talent, courses and workshops taken at various places throughout her life, self-instruction, and hours of practice.

"I was always drawing and sketching as a child, and taking classes," says Deon, 47, who received her first paid commission two decades ago. Since then, she has painted the likenesses of friends, family and members of the community looking for a unique way to commemorate themselves or their loved ones.

She usually performs copious



Deon in her yard with Cali, one of her two dogs. Deon, 47, generally takes more than 100 hours to complete a painting.

sketches and studies of her subjects as they sit in front of her. But often a portrait is a surprise gift, or has been commissioned to honor someone who has died.

That means Deon has to rely only on a few photos. However,

she has decades of experience and, in a pinch, can count on others to fill a subject's shoes.

"In many cases, I have family members pose for me," she says. Like countless artists before her, she also relies on props and mannequins to ensure the final

product is as true to three-dimensional life as possible.

In her home studio, three recent works, including a portrait of her son commemorating his high school graduation, showed depth and dimension, with a heavy use of color, light and shadows, bringing the subjects to life.

"I try to find their personalities, their spirit, rather than having a stiff image," Deon says.

Her skill at bringing a spark to her subjects has found a growing audience.

"There's been a surge within the past few years," says Deon, who explains that while having one's portrait painted might be unusual today, the craft has a time-honored tradition.

"I think it has a lot to do with tradition," she says, describing her work as the continuation of an art form that is practiced less and less in this digital age.

"Today, we have all kinds of other means to remember. We wouldn't even have to do oil paintings anymore because the medium exists to either use a photo or a digital image," explains Ruthann Hubbert-Kemper, executive director of the Pennsylvania Capitol Preservation Committee in Harrisburg.

Hubbert-Kemper says that the original impetus behind the governors' oil portraits was to provide a visual record of their terms in office at a time when no other medium existed.

"A lot of states don't have portraits. They just have the official photo of the governor, and as they come and go, they take the old ones down," Hubbert-Kemper says.

The tradition of painted portraits will continue in Harrisburg. The current Capitol was designed in 1902, with four rooms to hold the governors' images.

Including Schweiker's, which is slated to be hung in the next few weeks, there will be 56 portraits hanging.

"When everything is filled, there will be 85 paintings," Hubbert-Kemper says. "Once we reach that period, I don't know where they're going to go, because there's no space to put them."