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Portraits honor NKU presidents

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HIGHLAND HEIGHTS - Four presidents displayed side by side to pay tribute to the leadership that spurred growth. It sounds like Mt. Rushmore, but it's also what Northern Kentucky University is creating with a set of new paintings.

NKU has commissioned artist Shalmah Prince to paint portraits of each of the school's four permanent president. The first portrait, of original president W. Frank Steely, was unveiled earlier this month.

"I consider Dr. Steely the human cornerstone of this university," said James Votruba, NKU's current president. "Frank was a tireless and tenacious Founding Father. We have much to thank Frank Steely for as the first leader of a magnificent project known as NKU, a project that continues today."

The portrait is now on display at NKU's Steely Library. It was funded by the NKU Alumni Association.

"We wanted to create a tradition and record an important part of university history," said Deidra S. Fajack, director of alumni programs and licensing. "Our Alumni Council enthusiastically supported the idea, and we began interviewing artists for the work."

Portraits of the university's three subsequent presidents will be on unveiled over the next two years. Each will be painted by Prince.

"The artist's ability to capture the spirit and true likeness of Dr. Steely was exceptional," said Fajack. "The portrait was received very well by the Steely family and friends attending the (unveiling) event."

Prince, based in Cincinnati, said she has painted portraits for families and executives for 30 years. She studied under portrait artists Daniel Green and Aaron Shikler, who painted the official White House portraits of John and Jacqueline Kennedy.

"A portrait is a great thing for the alumni association to do to give history and personality to the school," said Prince, who said she has painted hundreds of portraits including five university presidents.

In this case, Dr. Steely was too ill to sit for a portrait.

"I used photos of Dr. Steely, interviews with his family, and I read his book," said Prince. "Doing those things gives life to a photograph and gives you a touch of his personality that you pick up on. Dr. Steely has and had a very adventuresome spirit and your brush work can communicate someone's personality."

Steely was NKU president from 1969 to 1975. He was succeeded as president of NKU by A.D. Albright (1976-1983), Leon Booth (1983-1996) and Votruba (1997-present). Jack Moreland served on year as interim president from 1996-1997.

Prince said she has completed Albright's portrait and is working on Booth's.
