

Montreal artist paints portraits of ER staff

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They are wearing masks, so only their eyes are clearly visible. But in the eyes of the 20 nurses, doctors and patient attendants who are the subjects of a series of portraits by Montreal artist Marja Hogan, one sees great compassion and kindness.

The series began after Dr. Robert Foxford, a physician in the emergency department of the McGill University Health Centre's Royal Victoria Hospital (MUHC), posted a photograph on Instagram in April of himself at work wearing a Care Bear mask – the Care Bears are a fictional group of multi-coloured bear characters – and a striped cap.

The COVID-19 outbreak had been declared a pandemic on March 11 and, at least in the early days, the great fear was the unknown.

Hogan called Foxford – she and her husband are good friends of his – to say she wanted to do a painting of him based on the photo. “I thought, ‘I’ll do a portrait and give it to him as a little thank you, a kind of positive memento of what they have gone through,’” she recalled.

So impressed was Foxford by Hogan's portrait “that I said to her, ‘You should do some more because this is awesome.’ And Marja got very enthusiastic about the project, and kept asking me for more and more photos.”

As he continued to photograph fellow ER colleagues who'd seen Hogan's portrait of him and now wanted their own portraits, three turned into six and 10 became 20. “It kind of took on a life of its own,” Foxford said.

Hogan gave the project a name – *Faces of COVID*. A friend submitted it to RBC Random Acts of Canadian, which showcases acts of support and kindness during the pandemic.

The 8-by-8-inch acrylic portraits will be exhibited this fall in the Royal Victoria's emergency department, said Alexandra Kirsh, curator of the RBC Art and Heritage Centre of the MUHC. Once they're taken down, Hogan will give them to their subjects in an expression of gratitude.

“Holding the picture was almost emotional,” said nurse Olivia Guay of her reaction on first seeing her portrait. “Looking at myself looking back at me, I thought, ‘This is what my patients see.’

“I thought, ‘It must be scary for the patients,’ but there was a calming beauty to it. I felt she captured that in a lot of us.

“It's uncanny how much a smile under a mask can make a difference. We are in gowns and goggles; even coming to the hospital is scary for people: The least I can do behind the mask is smile,” she said.



Six members of the Royal Victoria Hospital emergency room staff with artist Marja Hogan, centre, and the portraits she painted of them. From left: nurse Olivia Guay, Dr. Robert Foxford, nurse Tery Ann Alston, Hogan, nurse Gabrielle Garrel, patient attendant Olivier Gravel and nurse Stacy Sigler with their portraits, outside the McGill University Health Centre's Glen site. PHOTO: JOHN MAHONEY/POSTMEDIA NEWS



Gabrielle Garrel
PHOTO: JOHN MAHONEY/POSTMEDIA NEWS

Today the staff wears surgical masks but early on, amid concerns supplies could run out, many wore homemade cloth masks. They also wear caps and the wife of one of the ER physicians sewed colourful caps, “to help us brighten the emergency in such a grim time – to show colour and happiness in a time that seemed so scary and dark,” Guay recalled.

Working in her St-Ambroise St. studio, Hogan prepares each canvas, creating a colourful background from her imagination. Then she draws the person, zeroing in on details – a particular lanyard, eyes crinkled by a smile, earrings – that help capture a personality. Each portrait takes her about a day to complete.

For patient attendant Olivier Gravel, “it was a nice experience to see myself in a picture. I thought it was a very good likeness and I was amazed at the quality.”

Nurse Tery Ann Alston considers her portrait “a souvenir of this crazy time.”

The ER is all about teamwork, say the people who work there. “And the



Portraits of staff in the emergency department of the MUHC's Royal Victoria Hospital, painted by Montreal artist Marja Hogan from photographs taken by ER physician Robert Foxford with his phone. Top row, from left: Melissa Brown, nurse; Lyndsey Nolan, patient attendant; Stacy Sigler, nurse; Olivier Gravel, patient attendant. Second row, from left: Maxime Valerius, nurse; Robert Foxford, ER physician; Scott Delaney, ER physician. Third row: Dolores Dandrade, nurse; Lee Anna Coates, nurse; Tery Ann Alston, nurse; Marie-Lie Cadieux-Simard, physician, internist consulting to ER. Fourth row, from left: Katia Skladzien, nurse; Andreea Ionita Florinan, nurse; Nina Dupuis Corbière, nurse; Olivia Guay, nurse; bottom row, from left: Samantha Smith, nurse; Lianne Copeman, nurse; Gabrielle Garrel, nurse; Matti McNicol, nurse. PHOTO: SHAUNE THOMPSON

team aspect was so important in getting through COVID,” said nurse Gabrielle Garrel.

“I think the big thing is that somebody like Marja cared enough to do something for them,” Foxford said. “Early in COVID, when it was really difficult in the emergency, there was so much anxiety and we were worried some of us might die.”

Just as sending meals was a sign that people “were thinking about our effort,” Hogan's act of kindness resonated deeply with the staff, he said.

“Patient attendants and nurses are unsung heroes – and they were able to feel special,” he said. “The likenesses are so good. And it's fun at a time which is so stressful for all of us – a breath of fresh air.”



Stacy Sigler
PHOTO: JOHN MAHONEY/POSTMEDIA NEWS



Robert Foxford
PHOTO: JOHN MAHONEY/POSTMEDIA NEWS



Olivia Guay
PHOTO: JOHN MAHONEY/POSTMEDIA NEWS



Olivier Gravel
PHOTO: JOHN MAHONEY/POSTMEDIA NEWS



Tery Ann Alston
PHOTO: JOHN MAHONEY/POSTMEDIA NEWS