

# KELLY OAKES

*to see and be seen, to know and be known*

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## ***To See and Be Seen, To Know and Be Known: Portraits of People Who Have Experienced Homelessness***

*This show includes twelve large portraits I have painted of residents of Orange County. They have found permanent housing in partnership with service providers and the Orange County Partnership to End Homelessness after time in shelters and/or on the streets.*

*I have always been drawn to paint the inner spirit of a person, to those who may be unseen in our community. I felt called to paint residents in my town of Hillsborough, and Chapel Hill/Carrboro who may feel invisible — whose struggles might be misunderstood, and whose inner strengths often go unrecognized.*

*I offered individuals the opportunity to be painted, compensating them for their time. I hoped the invitation to paint their portraits would give them the opportunity to tell their stories, to be heard and seen, and to then to see themselves mirrored back in the paintings.*

*My intention through these portraits, is to share the spirit of resilience in these residents of Orange County, some who endure day-to-day lives of real hardship, sometimes trauma, in order to bring to light the essential, inner story of someone who might otherwise remain unseen and unknown — in fact, to remind all of us to look beyond the facades, and see the person within.*

- Kelly Oakes, September 2022

## *Thomas*

Thomas has overcome much heartache in his life. His cousin, with whom he was very close, died from being struck by a car. Tragically, his mother died of a heart attack on the way to his cousin's funeral. Thomas is disabled by a head injury that he sustained when he was younger. After his mother died, he moved from Raleigh to Durham, but the rent in Durham became too high, so he ended up in a shelter. The shelter closed and he was housed in a motel through Inter-Faith Council for Social Service for two months until an apartment in Hillsborough became available. He now has his own place, which he has made a "home" where his nieces come visit. He says faith has gotten him through hard times. One goal Thomas had when I first met with him was to purchase a vehicle. I am happy to report that he bought a car, though he is frustrated at the price of gas. He told me he put in \$2.00 worth the other day to see if the gauge would move...it did NOT! I love Thomas' sense of humor!



## *Sophia*

I am not sure I have ever met a person who works as hard as Sophia. She graduated from East Carolina University and afterwards worked at Duke as a Health Technician and after that with IBM. Sophia always wanted to be a librarian, so she went back to school to receive a Masters in Information Technology and Library Science. She moved to Oakland, CA, to work as a librarian. Tragically, her father developed pancreatic cancer and passed away shortly afterwards. This brought her back east, where she worked at NC Central and the United Way. Not long after this, her mother passed, causing her to suffer from depression. She could not get herself out of bed, and eventually could not work. Soon after, she found herself without a place to live. She eventually found help with the Orange County Partnership to End Homelessness. She now has her own place to live and a good job. When we met her hope was to purchase a car, and that happened just a few months later! As I said, Sophia works hard!



## *Lawrence*

Lawrence seemed a bit skeptical at first to meet with me. He wasn't sure why I would want to paint his portrait. I explained my mission to paint people who have experienced homelessness to highlight untold stories, after which he seemed to relax and told me his story. Lawrence grew up in Chapel Hill, attending Grady Brown Elementary, Phillips Middle School, Orange High School, and graduated from East Chapel Hill High. He played basketball and football. As a teenager, he worked at Carroll Woods. He has struggled to find his way and eventually became homeless. He was able to secure a job as a "food runner" at Top of The Hill restaurant and secured an apartment near his work. He hopes to move up to be a waiter.



## *Denesea*

Denesea sat for her portrait outside of her apartment in Chapel Hill while her two young children played nearby. As we talked, I could tell what a great Mom she was, helping her children and speaking to them in a kind and patient way. Denesea was born in Kentucky and moved to Charlotte when she was 12 years old. She moved to Chapel Hill about a year ago to be closer to her mother who helps with her children. Denesea is attending ECPI in Raleigh, an accelerated program to become a medical assistant. She wants a good life for her children.



## *Jacob*

The day I met with Jacob he was dressed to go to a job interview right after our meeting. He said he was turning his life around after struggling with substance abuse. His parents adopted him from Russia and he grew up in Chapel Hill. (This was very interesting to me as I adopted my daughter from Russia as well). We talked about how he is very grateful to his Mom for sticking with him and having faith in him through his recovery. Jacob said he is working very hard to stay sober and do the right thing. "If I can do it, it can be done." I tried to show his kind heart through his portrait.



## *Destiny and Kaiden*

I met Destiny and her adorable 2 year old son, Kaiden, at her apartment in Chapel Hill. Destiny is a patient mom of this vivacious little boy. She quietly took him in her arms, where he was happy to stay... for a little while at least. Destiny explained this is her first time feeling stable, as she was moving around a lot trying to find housing. Before finding her apartment, she was in a family shelter, which was difficult. She is grateful to be in Chapel Hill where her mother and brother (who Kaiden calls Daddy Daddy Dad) live close by and help her with childcare. She wants to go back to school to earn a degree in Early Childhood Development which, a perfect career for Destiny's disposition! Her goal for her small family is to buy a house with Community Home Trust, a place where Kaiden can play in the backyard.



## *Latoyna*

I met Latoyna on her work break outside of a group home for young adults with special needs. Her kind disposition leads me to believe she is good at this job. She has had a lot of turmoil and heartache in her life, which started in 2017 when her son was murdered. As anyone can imagine, this was an incredibly hard time for Latoyna. At the end of 2019, her sister who lived in Delaware died of cancer. She traveled to be with her nieces and soon after, COVID-19 prevented her return to NC. As a result, she lost her job and housing. Her nephew passed that year also. When Latoyna finally returned to NC, she found help through the Inter-Faith Council for temporary housing. She worked at Amazon through the holidays. She started working at the group home in early 2021, thinking it would be temporary, but has realized she likes the work and has stayed. The Orange County Partnership to End Homelessness found her a nice apartment. When we met, she was taking public transportation but was hoping to get her own car soon.





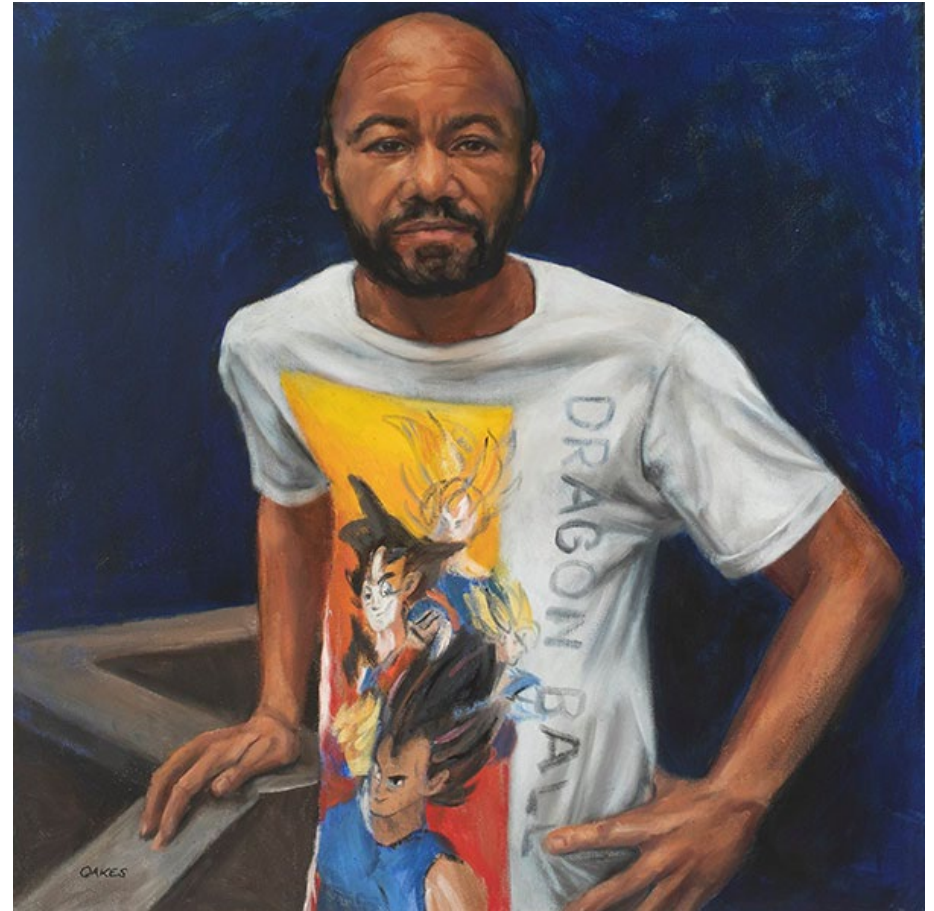
## *Harold*

I met Harold on a hot day while he was sitting outside on his front porch. He seemed to be the “mayor” of his apartment complex, as everyone was gathered around him as he told his story. Harold lived most of his life in Orange County but suddenly found himself homeless. Harold was housed with assistance from the Orange County Street Outreach, Harm Reduction & Deflection (SOHRAD) team. The towns of Chapel Hill, Carrboro, and Hillsborough, and Orange County, jointly fund the four-person SOHRAD team. They work solely with people who are unsheltered to connect them with housing and services.



## *William*

William has lived in Orange County most of his life. He went to grade school here and graduated from Chapel Hill High in 2001. He lived with his mother and grandmother and had a good life working and being with family. Unfortunately that changed when both his mom and grandmother died, leaving him alone and without a home. Even though he lost everything, he persevered and never gave up. William worked at O2 Fitness until it was closed during COVID-19, causing him to lose housing. He secured a Housing Choice Voucher, formerly called Section 8, which offers long-term rent assistance as long as participants earn under a certain income. Orange County prioritizes Housing Choice Vouchers for people exiting homelessness. He invited me to see his home, which he is very proud of, and enjoys Hillsborough for its peace and quiet. William loves wrestling but not as much as Dragon Ball Z. He looks up to Vagesta and his motto is “Keep on climbing. Not going to stop!”



## *Ronald*

Ronald is truly one of the kindest people I have ever met. He invited me to his apartment, beautifully decorated with care, and made me breakfast as we chatted. He told me about his job in another state where he worked for an energy company, working his way up to supervisor. As we spoke of topics in the news, BLM, race relations, and issues in our local community, a couple of hours went by without me even noticing. When we finally discussed why he was homeless a year or so before, he explained how he had been incarcerated for a minor crime many years ago. While in jail, he walked away one day while working on a chain gang and not being watched. That is when he started a new life, working as an upstanding citizen (though a fugitive) for almost 40 years. He was discovered through facial recognition software and brought back to NC, where he served time but was ultimately dismissed of his charges. He helps youth in Orange County by telling his story, encouraging them to stay in school and out of trouble.



## *Evelyn*

Evelyn is an Orange County native, growing up in Hillsborough. She lived with her grandmother for many years, whom she loves dearly. Evelyn was not talkative as I painted her, but was quiet and peaceful. She has a lovely smile!



## *Jimmy*

Jimmy is a big fan of his new digs and loves his apartment. He has worked at local grocery store for several years. Jimmy is glad to have a place to host his daughter, who he loves very much. He loves his portrait and was proud to show a photo of it to everyone he knows!

