

A Firehouse Mural for the Fallen

CFA alums create memorial at an iconic firehouse

IT STARTED WITH a simple Craigslist ad: Boston firefighters at the Huntington Avenue firehouse were looking for an artist to paint a commemorative portrait of one of their fallen.

When she saw the posting, Kristie Eden O'Donnell raced over with her portfolio before students from Massachusetts College of Art and Design, located across the street from the station, could lift a paintbrush.

WEB EXTRA
Kristie Eden O'Donnell (CFA'10) and Anya Smolnikova (CFA'09) talk about painting a mural at a Boston firehouse in a slideshow at bu.edu/bostonia.

"I came in here before they had a chance," says O'Donnell (CFA'10).

For the next three months, she and former classmate Anya Smolnikova (CFA'09) painted six commemorative portraits and a 30-by-8½-foot mural that sweeps across a third floor wall in the firehouse recreation room.

And they did it for free.

"This is their gift to the firefighters," says project manager Hugh O'Donnell, a College of Fine Arts

professor of painting and Kristie's father.

The art professor started the Site-Specific Art course, which requires students to find potential clients who could benefit from having their product or concept advertised through a work of art, 10 years ago. Artists with winning ideas complete their projects during a second semester. Previously, art developed in the class has been displayed at the Photonics Center, on MBTA signs along Commonwealth Avenue, in the University's FitRec Center, at Warren Towers, and in Sargent College.

O'Donnell took her father's course and has since placed her paintings with Red Bull and the MBTA, which posted one of her pieces at the B Line's East Campus stop.

Originally, the firefighters commissioned a portrait of

Lt. Kevin M. Kelly, a firefighter who died in January 2009 during a work-related accident in Mission Hill. He had been the face of the fire station, starring in the Discovery Channel's *Firehouse USA: Boston*, a 2005 series about firefighters.

But as O'Donnell talked to the station's men, she realized Kelly was not a unique case. Relatives of several firefighters had been killed in the line of duty working at the same firehouse.

Six portraits now grace the walls of the station's lounge. The men's faces are black-and-white, each

A detail of the mural at Boston's Huntington Avenue firehouse.



framed in fire engine red. The mural underwent a similar expansion, growing from one central figure to a sprawling painting that incorporates more than 40 firefighters and such iconic Boston sites as Fenway Park, the Citgo sign, Newbury Street, and the Statehouse dome.

"Working here was not like a studio atmosphere at all," Smolnikova says. "You heard every accident, every fire."

The two artists even rode along with firefighters as part of their research. They collected old photographs and interviewed the men about their specific tasks, the

differences between engines and ladders, and the purpose of each tool. O'Donnell spent six days a week painting; Smolnikova wedged her studio time around her full-time job.

From the project's beginning, they shot extensive photos of the mural and are working with Smolnikova's brother to produce a documentary film. They also hope the MBTA will hang posters advertising their work at the nearby Symphony stop.

"I tell the students, get the first one built, but get it done beautifully," says Hugh O'Donnell. "And the people will come. And they'll want more."

LESLIE FRIDAY



Anya Smolnikova (CFA'09) (left) and Kristie Eden O'Donnell (CFA'10), who painted a mural and six portraits at the firehouse, rode along with firefighters as part of their research.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY VERNON DOUCETTE