

Portrait of a Pet Artist

Burke artist Deanna Lewis has made pet portraits her full-time career since 2004

By **Glenn McCarty** - September 30, 2004



When Fran Vogel said goodbye to Wiley, her cat of six and a half years, in March, she wasn't expecting to have her pet beside her for the rest of her life. "He was the first pet I had been responsible for, 100 percent," said Vogel about her orange tabby who showed up on a friend's porch. Vogel, who resides in Alexandria, now carries the memory of her first cat with her, thanks to the work of Deanna Lewis, a Burke artist who specializes in pet portraits. Vogel ordered one of Lewis' portraits of Wiley soon after arriving home from the pet funeral home and enjoyed the experience. "Once I brought that picture home, that was closure for me. I could move on, having that portrait," said Vogel.

Lewis, 42, who, ironically has never owned a pet in her life, has made pet portraits her full-time vocation since January 2004, after a lifetime of art as a hobby and business as a career. "She definitely has a gift," said Vogel. "When you look at these portraits, the essence of the animal comes through to you."

Born in Kentucky, Lewis moved to Burke eight years ago and worked in management for many years. She was working as an office manager at a financial planning firm in 2001 when she received a request for a portrait of a colleague's two cats. "He asked how many I could do," said Lewis. "And he did the figuring, and said I could make about \$80,000 a year. I said, 'That's just fine with me.'"

Now Lewis works full time from her Burke townhouse, setting her own hours, sometimes sketching on the back deck, and other times in her basement studio. "It's a lot of fun. I use the phrase that everyday is like a Saturday," she said. Lewis built her business through word-of-mouth, fliers and a Web site www.petportraitsforyou.com which spread her work nationwide. She regularly takes orders from out-of-state clients, who send Lewis a snapshot of their pet. The orders keep coming. "Every time I start to panic, I get two or three orders at once," said Lewis.

Since June, she has done 65 portraits, including 10 currently in the works. She charges on average between \$250 and \$325 per portrait, which usually takes her several days to complete. Lewis begins with a rough outline, which she says she can knock off several of in a night, then completes the sketches at a later date. Ninety percent of her requests are for cats and dogs, but she has sketched some horses and even a hamster. "They got a hamster discount," she said.

Another facet of her work came to life in September 2001, when Lewis was asked to donate one of her portraits to an auction for a breast cancer charity. She was hoping to support a worthy cause and maybe gain some new clients. Now, Lewis makes donating portraits to charity auctions a regular occurrence. In the past three years, Lewis has, by her count, raised over \$10,000 for Northern Virginia and D.C. charities. She has a portrait up for auction at the Oct. 2 Mautner Project gala for lesbian health at the Hilton Washington D.C., and is donating a gift certificate to the Humane Society of Fairfax County fund-raiser at the Rhodeside Grill in Arlington on Oct. 9.

"She's a true friend to the animals," said Robin Walker in the development office at the Washington Humane Society. "It's wonderful when people share their talents to help us care for the animals. Lewis has donated portraits for several years to the silent auction at the Humane Society's "Bark Ball" each June. The charity work has been a nice bonus for Lewis, who hopes to begin work more non-pet subject matter into her professional work in the near future.

Vogel has already informed Lewis that she would like a portrait of her horse in the near future, and Lewis said she enjoys the fast pace of the work. "It hasn't been a bad transition at all," she said.