

Teen's artistic legacy endures

Dallas: Exhibit of girl's work will benefit fund in her memory

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By MIKKI KIRBY / Special Contributor to The Dallas Morning News

Katie Bolka saw an expressive world around her.

The faces she captured with paintbrush, pen and charcoal are intense and emotional. Each image tells of a moment in time during her short life.

On Feb. 3 the public will get a look into the mind of an emotional, innately talented teenager. The Al-So Gallery in downtown Dallas will host an exhibit of the Ursuline Academy student's work. Twenty pieces of mixed media will be on display through Feb. 17.

"I wanted to do this show to honor her talent, because it was true. She could have taken this talent and done so many things," said gallery director Mary Tomás.

Katherine Bolka died June 5 at age 17 after being in a coma for 5 ½ days after a car accident.

Proceeds from the sale of prints and posters of her work will go to a scholarship fund in her name. The Katherine Bolka Endowed Scholarship for Academic and Visual Arts Excellence fund has received gifts and pledges from 300 donors, collecting more than \$260,000 so far.

"As a parent, you never want your child to be forgotten," Johna Bolka said of her daughter, "Katie Bug."

The Bolkas are hoping that Katie, like many great artists before her, will be remembered through her work as well as the fund.

Her images are unlikely to be forgotten. She had a way of capturing moments in time through people's expressions, including her own.

"It's really hard to capture the likeness of people," Ms. Tomás said. But Katie did naturally.

"You don't just get that casually. That means you have an artistic soul. You can connect to somebody in that intimate way."

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MONA REEDER/DMN
Linda McCall checks out Katie Bolka's work at Al-So Gallery in downtown Dallas. 'I wanted to do this show to honor her talent, because it was true,' said gallery director Mary Tomás. Katie, one of Ms. McCall's students, died in a car crash in June.

The expression on Katie's face in her self-portrait is intense yet submissive. Her piercing blue eyes draw an observer into the painting.

"The look on her face is very arresting," said Ms. Tomás, who is also a family friend. "It almost tells the story of this beautiful girl who she was."

In the portrait the young artist's innate sense of color can be seen. Ms. Tomás said it takes some artists years to understand color and the balance between warm and cool.

Katie just had that special quality that can't be learned. It's a quality that is expressed from within, she said.

In a journal, Katie wrote: "My emotions grow inside of me, and I put it in my art journal. I guess you could say my emotions are my art."

While much of her work reflects her more intense, thoughtful side, some of it hints at her playful qualities reminiscent of the 17-year-old she was.

Katie's talent can be seen early on in a black charcoal drawing she did when she was 9. *Mary* is a solemn profile sketch of a woman garnishing a gold light above her head.

Along with friends, her sister Nina, 15, was a subject of hers. A sketch of Nina will be on display.

Nina, an accomplished high school thespian, had a special insight into her sister's work. Katie often shared her feelings with her sibling.

In a watercolor, Katie wrote down the arm of a girl, "I'm so glad I'm an island."

"When I asked her what that meant, she said she was glad she wasn't like anyone else," Nina said, adding that her sister wasn't a part of any particular clique. Katie befriended everyone and appreciated the differences among them, she said.

Among the 20 pieces of Katie's work included on display is a piece called *My future*, a newspaper collage and painting on cardboard with faces in balloons, including the face of Osama bin Laden. A girl is holding the balloons, one of which has a dollar sign.

Katie's art teacher still gets chills when she looks at *Katie R*, a portrait of one of Katie's friends.

"She was a prolific painter," her teacher Linda McCall said. "With that painting, she just nailed it."

An unfinished acrylic of a girl sitting near an open window, crouched on the floor, bears the title *Unfinished girl*, just like Katie, her mother, Johna, has said.

Her father, Rick, said Katie was headstrong and had an edginess about her that can be seen in much of her work.

"Katie was one tough little girl," he said. "She was a force to be reckoned with."

Mikki Kirby is a Dallas freelance writer.

IF YOU GO

What: An Evening in Honor of Katie Bolka

When: 6 to 9 p.m. Feb. 3

Where: Al-So Gallery, 1425 Dragon St.

Details: Thirty-five students from Ursuline Academy contributed to the exhibit along with several friends and professionals. Fine art prints of Katie's pieces will be sold unframed for \$100. Posters will be available for \$20. Students' original work will also be sold and include photography and paintings. Proceeds from the sale of fine art prints and posters of her work will go to a scholarship fund in her name.