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Mystery woman in oil portrait identified



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Agnes Jewett, a retired college professor, is the mystery woman captured in a 16x13-inch oil canvas painting, purchased by Kathy Sims at an estate sale.

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Gheni Platenburg • Originally published February 23, 2012 at 7:21 p.m., updated February 23, 2012 at 10:35 p.m.

On the morning of Feb. 16, Agnes Jewett made her way to a gas station near her home on a mission to pick up a copy of the Victoria Advocate.

Having been awakened out of her sleep the night before by several phone calls from friends urging her to check out a story on the newspaper's website, Jewett wanted to confirm the story was indeed true.

When she flipped open the paper, she found a portrait of herself.

"Who in the hell painted this?" Jewett said laughingly as she described her first thoughts of seeing the portrait on the page. "I was shocked that someone had actually painted it."

The portrait was of an attractive young, black woman with caramel-colored skin, a round face framed with a coil of jet black, softly curled hair, big brown eyes and a friendly smile.

She wore a black dress reminiscent of the 1950s. Her ears and neck were draped in stunning ivory pearls.

The portrait was purchased by Victoria resident Kathy Sims at an estate sale at the home of area antiquarians Orbit and Novella Hosey

in June 2005.

For years, Sims, who collects photographs and portraits, hoped to reunite the 16x13-inch oil canvas painting with either the nameless woman in the portrait or at least with the woman's relative.

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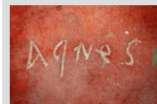
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With no artist signature and only the vague lead that the woman might have been a teacher in Victoria, Sims' search initially proved futile.

Upon seeing a story on black history in the Victoria Advocate earlier in the month though, Sims contacted the newspaper for help to find the painting's subject.

After the story ran on Sims' plight, the Advocate was flooded with emails and calls from readers who thought they had solved the conundrum.

The woman was Barbara Jordan, the first African American elected to the Texas Senate after Reconstruction and the first southern black female elected to the United States House of Representatives, or she was Jewett, according to their guesses.

Those who guessed Jewett solved the puzzle.

Jewett was all smiles as she saw the portrait for the first time Wednesday afternoon.

"She's home," said Sharyel Jones, as she sat on Jewett's porch while the two viewed the portrait for the first time in person.

Though Jewett said she took the photo when she was about 19 or 20 years old, as she held the portrait next to her face, the likeness was an undeniable match.

"I was shocked at my size, even though I remained that size for years; and I was shocked at how much I had aged," said Jewett, who was a vision of déjà vu as she wore a snazzy black outfit and flashed a toothy smile just as she had so many years ago in the portrait.

Jewett was a student at St. Phillip's College at the time. She said she had taken the photo that inspired the portrait when she came home to Victoria to attend a funeral.

The black dress and pearls she wore in the photo were a gift from Mary Vivian O'Connor, who was like a second mother to her.

"She sent me everywhere and gave me everything she could to make me the lady that she thought I should be," Jewett said about O'Connor.

Her photo was taken by Truett Tillmon, who worked for DuPont as a security guard and did photography in his spare time.

Some time later, Jewett said, she was approached by now-deceased Victoria resident and artist Billy Barefield, who said he had come across a copy of the picture taken by Tillmon and that one day he would paint her portrait from it.

That was the last time Jewett heard anything about the portrait.

She remains unsure whether the portrait was painted by Barefield or if O'Connor commissioned someone else to paint it, but she vowed to ask questions until she gets to the bottom of the intriguing mystery.

Sims said she was delighted that Jewett has the artwork.

"I think it's great. I hope she is happy to have the portrait," said Sims. "I really expected to find her family more so than the person herself."

"If I were her, I would wonder what path it took from then to her, but I guess we'll never know."

Sims was also delighted the woman in the portrait was not only a teacher like the clue suggested, but that she was also very accomplished in many other regards.

Jewett graduated from F.W. Gross High School in 1956, two years after the Supreme Court ruled that segregating schools by race was illegal, but 10 years before Victoria schools actually integrated.

She went on to earn bachelor's degrees in economics, business management and psychology and a master's degree in counseling from Prairie View A&M University.

In addition to working in Germany in the civil service for 13 years, she worked as a store manager for Sears, implementing its former renowned "Budget Store" concept.

Her resume also boasts her time working as an assistant to the graduate dean at Prairie View A&M University and her more than 20-year career as a former counselor and professor at Victoria College.

A trailblazer, Jewett made history becoming the first black full-time professor at Victoria College, during which time she taught courses in psychology, business orientation, biology and reading.

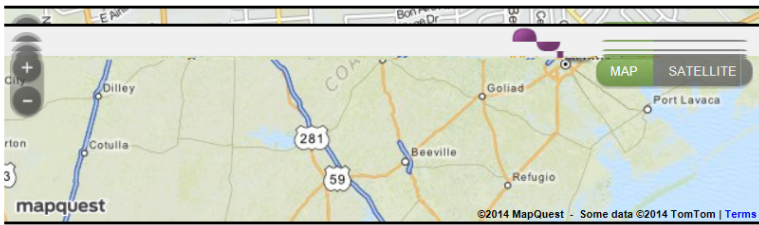
Well-known in the Crossroads for her civic-mindedness and feisty, outspoken nature, Jewett went on to become executive director of The Greater Victoria Civic Coalition, which sought to emphasize African-American culture and address the high dropout rate in the Victoria school district as well as the low political participation of blacks in Victoria County.

The organization is now dormant, but Jewett said she hopes to revive it once she beats her fourth bout of cancer.

"Overcoming cancer is primarily faith, attitude, a good doctor and fortitude. It's mind over matter," she said. "I have faith."

She plans to have her portrait restored and donate it to the Victoria College/University of Houston-Victoria library.

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