

# Ann Arborites



GRIFIN LINDSAY

## Johnnie Dew

### *From factory worker to portrait painter*

Johnnie Dew wanted badly to go to the one-week portrait-painting workshop in New York State, but he was scared. The former factory worker, who suffers from chronic pain and had only recently started to paint seriously, wondered whether he could hold his own—especially since he had almost never painted figures from life before. But his wife, Kathy, pushed him into enrolling. “Before I knew it, she had set it up,” he says gratefully, as Kathy, sitting nearby, beams with satisfaction.

Taught by nationally acclaimed portrait painter Daniel Greene, the workshop was stressful. The students painted in a studio/barn, without air-conditioning, in 100-degree heat. But Dew was thrilled when the no-nonsense Greene praised his talent. He returned home, his technique improved and his confidence elevated. “It made something go forward,” he said. Last month he displayed his portraits for the first time, at Westminster Presbyterian Church. The Dews are hoping that after years of doing odd jobs like fixing computers, Johnnie will achieve financial success doing something he loves. Says Kathy fervently, “All these years, I’ve been praying and asking the Lord to give him something to do.”

Johnnie, fifty-one, and Kathy, forty-eight, relax in the living room of their eighty-five-year-old home near downtown. It was the home of Kathy’s grand-

father, Elmer Knox, who hauled trash for a living and owned several other houses on the block. Although Kathy grew up in Detroit, she spent summers in Ann Arbor, and was thrilled when her now-deceased grandfather sold them the house (letting them name the price) twenty-six years ago.

Kathy has angular, handsome features, wears her hair in a ponytail, and says two or maybe five words to every one of Johnnie’s. Johnnie, a big man with a grizzled beard who moves slowly because of his physical troubles, escorts a visitor to a small studio on the second floor. One portrait shows a fair-haired little girl looking contemplative as she holds a stuffed animal. Another is of Kathy wearing a striking red hat and posed against a background of fall trees. The colors are rich, the details are intricate, and both the woman and the little girl seem caught in the act of being themselves.

Johnnie painted as a child, and his teachers at Romulus High encouraged him to study art in college. But, Johnnie says, “I was interested in hanging out with my friends and with girls.” He also liked the good money he made at the Ford Motor transmission plant in Livonia. And, he says, he doesn’t regret his choice, because he met Kathy at the plant. They married when he was twenty-four and she was twenty. Johnnie worked at the plant while Kathy homeschooled their children, so they could be educated in a faith-filled atmosphere. But Johnnie—who did much bending and lifting on the job—began having pains in his back. He was diagnosed with degenerative disc disease and permanent nerve damage. After two surgeries he was unable to work anymore; he retired on disability at age thirty-five. Attempts to relieve his pain, including drugs

and acupuncture, have been largely unsuccessful, though he has learned some pain-management skills that have helped him live with his situation.

Despite the constant discomfort, he and Kathy (who has a weekend job delivering bundled newspapers to *Ann Arbor News* carriers) do a lot of back-and-forth bantering. Johnnie says that Kathy possesses the marketing and business sense he lacks. “I’m too nice,” he says. “I’m not so nice,” counters Kathy, and they both laugh. Humor has helped them through their struggles, financial as well as medical. They are now looking at a sobering new expense: the education of their youngest child, Michel, a prize-winning flutist who will be attending Temple University in Philadelphia next year. Michel received some scholarship money, but not enough to cover all her expenses.

Johnnie and Kathy are holding their breath that he can help Michel by establishing himself as a portrait painter. Johnnie’s artistic talent was a surprise to Kathy. Two years ago, at his mother’s funeral, Johnnie encountered a childhood friend who asked him whether he still painted. He didn’t, but something clicked, and he went home and painted a portrait of their oldest child, Rachel. “I had no idea he had this ability!” Kathy exclaims. For his show last month, he displayed seventeen portraits. Although they did not get new commissions, they did sell several prints, and they’re now exhibiting Johnnie’s paintings at their home, by appointment. But Johnnie is driven by spiritual as well as practical motivations. His paintings, Johnnie says, “show God’s creations—and the highest one is mankind.”

—Eve Silberman