

BY PAMELA GWYN KRIPKE



# The Unlikely Artist

How a homeless man's canvas wound up hanging in the White House.

**T**HE TABLES TOUCH, END TO END, ARRANGED IN A SQUARE THAT RIMS the room. He likes the corner, unattached, his easel angled to catch the light from the window at his back. Cornelious Brackens Jr. lifts his brush from an aluminum pan of paint and dabs it carefully onto the canvas in front of him, then onto his apron, then back. Fire-orange and red dots form leaves against a turquoise sky. He slants his head slowly for a sidelong look, moving as if through still water. "I am so deep in thought, people could be calling my name and I don't hear them," Brackens says later. "I forget the world."

For as long as the studio is open, he paints. Then he goes home. But not to a house or an apartment or even a friend's sofa. Home is the Union Gospel Mission, a shelter on Irving Boulevard. He has a bed, the top bunk, and a locker. "The people are the same. It doesn't change much," says Brackens, 41. "There are rules and order. With a hundred men in a room, I like that. I like the discipline."

His landing at the mission, and the discovery of a latent talent, reads like an O. Henry tale. Though homeless, this delightful man realizes that he has lit upon a passion that he might have never known had all gone according

to plan. It is the possibility that the pursuit creates that makes the bunk bed not so stiff, the crowded bathroom navigable. Dinner at the shelter tastes good.

"I have taken a funny path to get here," he says, digging in a box for a tube of magenta. "I feel like it's a calling for me. Everything else failed. Here, I have gained success."

**B**RACKENS HAD A FORTUNATE LIFE as a kid in West Dallas. The eldest of three, he had two parents at home, both with reliable jobs and expectations for their children. He attended the High School for Health Professionals and planned to work in a hospital. His sister is now a nurse's aide; his brother, a department store warehouse clerk. Their parents divorced when they were grown. Following high school,

Brackens enlisted in the U.S. Army. He was stationed for three years at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, where he trained as a telephone operator. In

**HOME IS WHERE THE ART IS:** Cornelious Brackens Jr. with one of his paintings.

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retrospect, he may have fared better in health care.

"It was like living in prison," he says, holding his brush in mid-stroke. "Do this, do that. It plays with your mind. It left me emotionally drained, and when I got out, I was in no shape to deal with life, with anything." Brackens thought he'd find direction in the military. Instead, he lost his way. "Tools to prepare? Not in my case. Not in a lot of people's cases."

He has painted a self-portrait, in full khaki uniform, important-looking and proud, at first glance. He'd rather, though, tell stories of the people he imagines. Vivid lime grass shoots up from the bottom of this canvas, where, in the center, figures of two women begin to emerge.

When he returned to Dallas after his service, Brackens took various low-paying jobs. He worked in restaurants. He was an overnight security guard. He managed to earn enough to rent a room for a while. Ultimately, he couldn't keep up with the payments and chose to live on the streets. "My family tried to find me and take me home. I have a good family that wanted to help. But I guess I didn't want to accept it."

For six years, Brackens stayed in North Dallas, earning money by working odd jobs every so often. He spent most of his time in parks, sleeping on benches, traveling light. "I didn't have many things," he says. Access to food and clothing was limited north of the city, and he had it in mind to make it to the city's center. "I'm kind of shy," he says. "So it took me pretty long to come downtown. I was too embarrassed to ask people about how to survive here." Soon after arriving, he heard about the bus to the shelter. And then, the studio.

**T**HE FIRST DAY A PERSON COMES TO the door, Cynthia Brannum hands him a sketchbook and asks him to be more observant when he is out and about and to draw what he sees. "I gave Cornelious a pad when he came in three years ago," she says. "The next day, it was completely full."

For 15 years, the Stewpot Art Program has been a refuge for homeless men and women. On the second floor of The Stewpot, across the street from First Presbyterian Church, walls that lead to the

classroom are covered with paintings and drawings, floor to ceiling, a range of styles and expertise as diverse as the experiences of their makers. Eight classes are given each week. As many as 30 students come regularly. Shows are mounted and work is sold, with all but 10 percent of proceeds going straight to the artist. The Stewpot is a 33-year-old day shelter and resource center for homeless and at-risk adults and children.

"Some want to be professionals. Some just want to experiment," says Brannum, who has a degree in painting and drawing from SMU and has directed the art program for four years. "What I love the best

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is when they come in, there are concerns weighing on their minds. Then, they start opening up, they start working, they get interested in their work, and those things start to be important to them. They start to think, 'How can I make this piece better?' And they begin expanding in this wonderful way. Sometimes, I have to push them out the door when it's time to leave."

At first, Brackens drew with pastels, creating portraits of famous people in rich, saturated colors. He had never painted, but with Brannum's encouragement, he tried. He dreamed up a house by a lake, with a multicolored roof. "It was just awful," he says, "but someone bought it." His second piece sold for \$50. He has since painted hundreds of canvases, taking two to three days to complete each one. His parents have his work hanging in their homes. And Laura Bush did, too, displaying a religious rendering she received as a gift in the residential part of the White House.

"I think it was a guest room," Brackens says. "She sent me a letter."

Last year, he earned \$10,000 solely from his art.

Brackens quickly found his style as a

folk artist, using blazing colors and simple shapes to tell tales of family, friends, struggle, faith. While he waits for the studio to open, he reads art books off the shelves at the public library. "As trained artists," Brannum says, "we have to bite our tongue sometimes, wanting to teach him about structure and things like perspective. But what he is doing is so natural for him, and done with such joy and spontaneity, that I can't imagine he could beat that with all those other techniques. Basically, we let the guy do his thing."

A bench appears under the two ladies, one in a lilac dress and shoes, the other in pink, with white polka dots. Brackens paints from his head and has little interest in reproducing reality, which, he says, would turn out nothing like it truly is, anyway.

This commitment, the way he spends most of his days—getting up at 4:30 in the morning to make the early bus into town, leaving at noon for lunch at the shelter, returning to work more—the life he has structured around his new gift does not feel, to Brackens, like a choice. "I always think about how far I've come from the streets. But from them, I got this opportunity to try. It is unlikely. But this is the thing in life I've been searching for," he says. "I think it's what I'm supposed to do."

He drags his brush upward, slowly, from the shoulders of one of the women, sending her arms overhead. They have halos of gray hair and circles for mouths. No eyes, no noses. One is telling the other something funny. They are having a good time on the bench.

The piece is called *Will We Be Friends For Life?* Brackens thought of the question first, before deciding on the composition. The answer, he firmly believes, is yes. "If I am trying to portray a message, I want to show the good part of it. If I can make something positive in a painting, I know it will turn out that way in life because it turned out that way in the painting. I guess I'm trying to encourage myself, to believe that I can live like the stories I sometimes tell." ■

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