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Catherine Thornton is an artist to her core. She pours herself into each project as if it were her last and spends any amount of time she deems necessary to brainstorm and make sure every aspect of her art reflects her intention. This “incubation,” as she calls it, allows Catherine to take the utmost pride in her work.

“I research,” she said. “I want to know the why, not just the how.”

Born on an Air Force base in Mississippi, Catherine’s family lived in several states. “We moved, on average, every 18 months,” she said.

Eventually, she started at Roanoke Bible College in Elizabeth City, where she met her husband. They got married after graduating, and for many years she enjoyed raising her two sons, stating she wanted to stay home and be their influence.

Having always had a penchant for art, Catherine decided to go back to school and earned a degree in painting and sculpture from Longwood College in Farmville, Virginia. She was not able to pursue her dream of becoming a professional artist for the next 15 years, but that didn’t stop her creativity: She constantly explored new concepts and techniques, doodling on napkins or whatever was available when an idea struck.

1/1

Her professional endeavor began after taking an intense summer course at Penland School of Crafts near Asheville, where instructors from all over the world teach different art skills. Catherine remembers one of her instructors, a well-known artist and sculptor from Lithuania, as the person who sealed her decision to become an artist.

“He was a perfectionist,” she recalled. “He was the person who launched my technical abilities. They were rusty.”

Catherine was subsequently accepted into Artspace, a progressive artist community in Raleigh, and was able to work primarily from home during her five years there.

After visiting New Bern one day, she happened upon Fine Art at Baxters, a gallery located downtown. Having no intent other than taking a peek, Catherine surprised everyone, even herself, when she saw a sign for a vacant studio and told

the owners she'd like it to be hers. She has now occupied that workspace since the end of 2016.

Although the commute is long, Catherine loves what she does. Her cozy studio is adorned with her own whimsical paintings and sculptures, along with partially-finished projects waiting for her finishing touch.

She enjoys creating pieces with various mediums and especially likes making ones with which observers can interact. In support of the North Carolina Symphony's New Bern chapter, she volunteered to decorate a violin to be auctioned, adorning hers to resemble Mr. Potato Head with interchangeable parts.

From the nominator:

Catherine Thornton may not LIVE in Craven County, but she sure has spent a tremendous amount of time this past year in her studio at Baxters Fine Art Gallery in downtown New Bern. An incredible artist and a jewel of a human being, New Bern is lucky that Catherine has found a home for her artistic talents at Baxters. I met Catherine over a year ago when the CarolinaEast Foundation was exploring ideas for a creative alternative to a typical brick campaign for the SECU Comprehensive Cancer Center. Living in a community full of incredible artists, we were seeking out a way to showcase some of that art. Jim Bisbee introduced us to Catherine and we began to explore the concept of a "Garden of Hope". A tile "garden" located on the wall adjacent to the courtyard in the cancer center. Since May of 2017, Catherine has been working tirelessly on hand making and hand painting 200 different tiles (five different flower designs, one tile with two robins, one double tile with a spider lily and one double tile with a hummingbird and honeysuckle). I truly believe this project is a win, win, win, win. Win: the patients that get to enjoy this unique, beautiful display of art. Win: the donors that get to honor a loved one or send a special message on the purchased tiles. Win: the SECU Comprehensive Cancer Center for the additional \$82,000 in capital campaign dollars. Win: the Foundation and community having made a new friend – the wonderful Catherine Thornton. I often ask Catherine if she is tired of making tiles and in her refreshingly sincere manner, she answers with a beautiful half smile, "No, this is a really important project and I am happy to be contributing."

-Jill Thompson

"If I can do a piece that has some interactive part, the viewer or participant becomes their own artist," she explained. "That's kind of fun. You see the personality of whoever is doing it."

In May 2017, the CarolinaEast Foundation sought after a local artist to take on the task of designing a creative wall of artwork for the SECU Comprehensive Cancer Center at CarolinaEast Medical Center. The project was planned to celebrate loved ones while bringing hope to patients and families treated at the cancer center, which is slated to open in early 2019. The Foundation decided Catherine should be that artist, and she accepted immediately.

“It was serendipity—it has to be,” she said. “Just being in Baxters wasn’t in my plan. I jump into things, so I jumped. I didn’t know what it was or ask for details; I just went for it.”

After a month of assembling ideas and much deliberating, Catherine decided on a “Garden of Hope” theme. She wanted the idea of flowers and delicate creatures surviving the long, cold winter and making it all the way to a green spring full of sprouting flowers and sunshine to symbolize hope.

Once installed, the collection of 200 tiles will decorate the wall next to the indoor garden at the cancer center. The tiles vary in size and have eight different designs: New Bern spider lily, tulip, white narcissus, hyacinth, daffodil, lily, hummingbird and robins. Tiles can be purchased and personalized with two lines of text, including the name of the person being celebrated. Catherine created each design and has worked tirelessly to handmake and fire each one. She hand painted them to make sure every tile is unique, recruiting the help of fellow Baxters artists Donna Slade and Vicki Vitale to help near the end.

“I get to color nuance just like a real garden,” she said. “Each one is different.”

During her career as an artist, Catherine has received numerous awards and her work has been shown at many exhibitions. About seven years ago, one of her pieces was chosen by Craft Alliance in St. Louis as part of a five-year traveling exhibition, beginning at the Forbes Gallery in New York. Catherine’s work has also been featured in downtown New Bern’s monthly ArtWalk.

She currently resides in Cary and has a summer getaway at Atlantic Beach, but she hopes to move to the New Bern area sometime soon.

“I love this area,” she said. “It’s just right for me. I’m not a big city gal. To me, New Bern is the right size city.”

Catherine’s selfless act of taking on such an immense, time-consuming project with no questions asked mirrors her giving nature and inclination to help others. Her ability to create heartfelt art is a gift, and so is her willingness to share such talent that is often carried out on a deeply personal level.

