



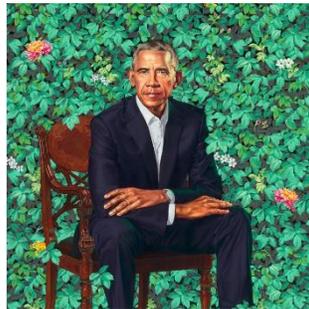
by Jennifer Kearney

June 28, 2021

Dear Westminster Friends,

I wanted to write to thank you for the \$340 2021 Commitment Grant, and to let you know how the project was received. For this project, I took individual portraits of each fifth grader at Wenonah Elementary School to mark their "graduation" and promotion to middle school. Most of the students at this school come from disadvantaged situations, and the school understandably struggles to raise funds to commemorate fifth grade graduation, often leaving students without the tangible mementos that other area elementary schools provide their fifth graders at graduation, such as class t-shirts, photos, and awards. The grant funds were used to print 5x7 photographs and purchase 8x10 matted frames and gift bags to deliver the portraits to the students during their graduation celebration.

In deciding how to photograph the students, I drew inspiration from the official Presidential portrait painted of Barack Obama by Kehinde Wiley. I chose to take their photos seated in front of a lush green bush right outside the school. Here are a couple images I took along with President Obama's portrait:



The kids really enjoyed having their photos taken! I am sure some of the fun was the excuse to leave the classroom on a beautiful morning, but I also think they appreciated a few minutes of one-on-one attention. Many of them started out with me awkward and shy, but when it was time to go, they usually left reluctantly, smiling and chatting. For several of them, I was able to tell at first glance that they had very little at home, and I did what I could to make their experience extra-positive and full of praise. I said many little prayers as I interacted with these young people.

The principal suggested I deliver the framed photos a week before their celebration and set them up in the school library for all the students in the school to see. One of the fifth grade classes was there as I set them up. They were so excited to see them! Here is a photo of the framed portraits and a poster I made (all ready to go in my dining room, as I was unable to take photos inside the school).



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Each portrait was given to the student with a message I included below, which was reviewed and approved by the school system's central office administrators. Thus, I was unable to include any specifically religious information.

Your fifth grade portraits were inspired by the official Presidential portrait of forty-fourth President Barack Obama, painted by Kehinde Wiley.

No matter your political beliefs, President Obama's story is inspiring. He grew up in Hawaii and Indonesia with his mother and stepfather. "I was raised as an Indonesian child and a Hawaiian child and as a black child and as a white child," Obama later recalled. He felt these many influences made him a better person.

Like President Obama, the 2020-2021 fifth graders at Wenonah Elementary School come from many backgrounds. I hope you use your unique influences, excellent education, and special gifts to do good, share love, and bring joy in your future ahead.

"Keep exploring, keep dreaming. Keep asking why. Don't settle for what you already know. Never stop believing in the power of your ideas, your imagination, and your hard work to change the world."

– Barack Obama

Thank you again for the support to see this project through. I felt honored to be a representative of our church, even though it was necessary to keep most of the church's participation anonymous. The feedback I've received is that the portraits were gratefully received and brought many families joy.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jennifer Kearney".