



Photo by Jerry McCrea

Cara London of Flemington works on her rendition of 'Stakeout' under the watchful eye of Laurence Van Winkle, who commissioned the painting of his pet ferret, which died a month ago

Artist ferrets out data to create a memory

By ELEANOR BARRETT

Gone are the days when North Plainfield police Lt. Laurence Van Winkle carried his pet ferret, Stakeout, in his shirt pocket.

And, no longer will the lieutenant have to dip a fishing pole behind his file cabinet to make the small creature come out and be sociable.

Stakeout died in August, but Van Winkle is hoping that his pet's memory will live on.

Art teacher Cara London has been commissioned by the lieutenant to capture the essence of the pet on canvas. Last week, she was busy doing just that in her Plainfield art studio.

A Flemington resident and teacher in the deCret School of the Arts in Plainfield, London has been studying the form and personality of Stakeout via some 20 photographs.

Although it is difficult to paint or draw a picture of a living creature by using a photograph as a model, the stories Van Winkle has told her have made the task a bit easier, she said.

"It was an unusual story, and I really wanted to do a good job for him," she said. "I saw how much it meant to him when he came in. To see and hear about this policeman and his little, itty-bitty ferret, it was just surprising and nice."

The start of Stakeout's life with

Van Winkle is almost as unique as the way the relationship is being memorialized — a full canvas portrait of the ferret, complete with his police badge, is expected to be finished in a few weeks.

Stakeout arrived at the North Plainfield Police Department in the winter of 1991, when an officer, who was called to investigate a complaint of a strange animal, found the furry creature.

The ferret was placed in Van Winkle's custody. Soon after, he was given a name and a collar with a police badge and bell. The new pet found a home in the detective bureau and helped to ease the then-recent loss of Van Winkle's dog, Rip.

A construction project at the station later caused Van Winkle to move Stakeout to the safer haven of his North Plainfield home, where the ferret made friends with two other ferrets already living there.

But the other two ferrets never held a candle to Stakeout, the lieutenant said.

In addition to providing kitty litter and a good diet of cat food for the weasel-like animal, Van Winkle spent thousands of dollars on veterinarian bills to treat tumors and a cyst Stakeout developed.

London, who is eight months' pregnant, said she can understand the lieutenant's grief, since she is an animal lover, too.