

TEACHING THE PAINTER-IN-CHIEF

VILAS TONAPE TEACHES A FORMER PRESIDENT THE ART OF THE STROKE

BY DANNY HEITMAN, FORUM EDITOR

In 2019, Vilas Tonape received an honor he considers one of the highlights of his life.

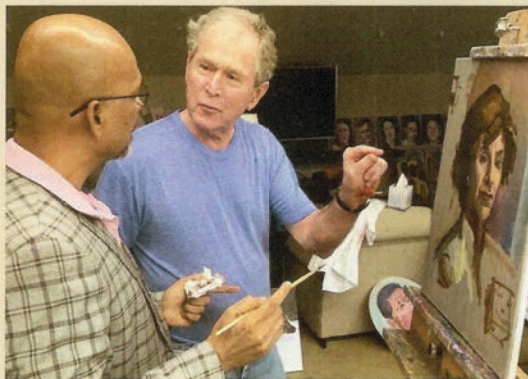
That was the year Tonape, who chairs the art department at Methodist University in Fayetteville, North Carolina, was asked to join the campus chapter of Phi Kappa Phi. A little less than a year earlier, Tonape had given a private painting lesson to former President George W. Bush.

Both experiences, says Tonape, underscore how far he's come since arriving in the United States from his native India in 1994 with very little. His good fortune, he adds, also obligates him to give back, which is why Phi Kappa Phi's mission of service appealed to him when he was asked to become a member.

Tonape's meeting with Bush came through a mutual friend, Jim Woodson, who had taught Tonape during his graduate school days at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, Texas. Woodson told Bush, who's taken up portrait painting since leaving the White House in 2009, that he could learn a lot from Tonape, who specializes in portraiture. The former president had been painting his subjects from photographs, but he wanted to learn how to paint using live subjects.



Former first lady Laura Bush, former president George W. Bush, and Vilas Tonape are seen at the Bush family home in 2018. Tonape (Methodist University) made the visit to give George W. Bush a lesson in portrait painting.



Vilas Tonape uses a painting of former first lady Laura Bush to teach former president George W. Bush how to paint portraits using live subjects. Bush has pursued painting since leaving the White House in 2009. Photos provided by Vilas Tonape.



Vilas Tonape specializes in portraits such as the one above, called "Witnessing." In the foreground is Fayetteville artist Dominique Wright. At right is a rendering of Mexican artist Frida Kahlo. Tonape himself is in the background. The painting is meant to represent a meeting of three cultures.

Pretty soon, Bush was on the phone with Tonape, who reflexively stood up when he heard Bush's voice out of respect for the former leader of the free world. "It wasn't until later that I remembered he couldn't see me," Tonape recalled, laughing.

Tonape traveled to Dallas to give Bush his lesson on March 14, 2018. The former commander in chief greeted Tonape outside his Dallas home and offered to help haul in the art supplies. He also wanted to personally clean Tonape's brushes after the lesson, gestures of humility Tonape found endearing.

The live model for the lesson was former first lady Laura Bush. "She was so graceful," he recalled. Tonape found George W. Bush a perceptive student, keen to slight details. "He was really more of a graduate-level student," Tonape said.

The lesson and lunch at Bush's home was something Tonape couldn't have imagined when he was growing up in India. "I came to America with \$375," he said. "From that point, to be a university department chair, and to be invited to teach an American president – well, I have no complaints."

Getting an invitation to join Phi Kappa Phi brought its share of emotion, too. "I had moist eyes. I couldn't believe it," Tonape told *Forum*.

He said membership in the Society has deepened his commitment to service. Tonape has raised thousands of dollars for the homeless by auctioning his art, and he continues to return to India when possible to teach students there.

"To be recognized by Phi Kappa Phi is an inspiration to go further – to do more for the community," Tonape said. "It's not a full stop."