



KANSAS LEGEND BIOGRAPHY

Elizabeth “Grandma” Layton (1909-1953)

Born in Wellsville, Kan., Elizabeth Layton spent most of her life as a mother and housewife battling depression. Layton spent 13 years with an abusive, alcoholic husband with whom she had five children. When she reached her breaking point, she packed up her kids and left her husband, taking over as managing editor of the daily paper, a position long held by her father.



With her children grown, Layton suffered a nervous breakdown in the 1950s. She received 13 shock therapy treatments in an effort to recover. She sought counseling and took anti-depressants, but nothing seemed to help her overcome her depression. She married Glenn Layton, her friendly neighbor, but slipped into her deepest depression yet following the death of one son in 1976.

On advice from her sister who was living in California and taking an art class for seniors, Layton put forth one last effort to cure her illness. She enrolled in an art class at Ottawa University at the age of 68, where her fellow college students called her “grandma.” The contour drawing class taught students to focus on the subject while referring to the paper seldom for only points of reference. Instructor Pal Wright suggested drawing oneself if there was nothing left to draw.



Layton went home and took this advice to heart. The overweight, elderly housewife with frizzy gray hair picked up a mirror and began drawing her first self-portrait. After finishing drawing after drawing, she would reflect on the emotions in the pictures. She drew herself and her husband often in various situations and various emotional states. Soon, Layton felt her depression lifting.

Over the course of her 15-year drawing career, Layton drew more than 1,000 drawings, many dealing with pervasive social issues. Women’s rights, racial prejudice, gender stereotypes, the myths and misconceptions of old age, and the environment were all subjects of her art. Layton’s work earned national recognition and was exhibited as a one-woman show at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American Art.

Today, Layton’s work has been displayed in more than 250 museums nationwide and was booked by the National Council on Aging. She has been featured in “People,” “Life” and “Parade” magazines. In 1993, Layton died after suffering a stroke. Her work continues to symbolize hope and triumph over an illness that plagues millions of Americans.

