

N.J. woman's artwork on display at the White House

by [Paula Saha](#)/The Star-Ledger

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In the Blue Room of the White House stands a North Carolina Fraser fir, 18 feet tall and trimmed with 369 hand-painted ornaments.

Among those brightly colored bulbs is one nestled at about eye level. It bears illustrations of a New Jersey woman, in various aspects of her life. Working as a doctor, playing with her children in the snow, painting a portrait, helping an elderly woman with her groceries.

You can find the name of the state etched on the sphere. But what you won't know, from looking at it, is the story of the woman who made this ornament. You won't know from looking at it that she is legally blind, and that a year ago, as diabetes darkened her world, she hid out in her Jersey City apartment, terrified that she would never paint again.



Jerry McCrea/The Star-Ledger
Artist Bojana Coklyat at work in her Jersey City studio.

Today, Bojana Coklyat, 29, has had -- in her words -- a "complete, absolute turnaround." She's a thriving artist, volunteering to help visually impaired art students at St. Joseph's School for the Blind in Jersey City and the New Jersey Foundation for the Blind in Denville. She shows her work in exhibitions and takes commissions. And then, a little over a month ago, she learned she had been selected by Sen. Frank Lautenberg's office this year to decorate one of the ornaments for the White House Christmas tree.

A staffer from Lautenberg's office first saw Coklyat's work at an exhibit at The New Jersey Foundation for the Blind, where Coklyat took classes when she first lost her vision. That, she says, is where she found her confidence again.

The foundation's core curriculum is to re-teach people who have lost their sight the basic activities of daily living -- using a computer to communicate, organizing their lives or learning how to cook. But the electives provide the students with the chance for recreation. Art, music, exercise and basic home repairs are all part of the course menu.

Coklyat's turnaround story, said executive director Iris Torres, is one Torres hears often. "It really helps our students really realize I cannot only do what I used to again, I can actually learn to do new things which have so much meaning in our life ... that's the healing part."

Being selected to paint a White House Christmas ornament has been a particular honor, Coklyat said, especially because she was chosen not because she is blind, but because her artwork stood out. "For me, it's great to see that they were able to look past the idea that I was visually impaired," she said.

"What this says about Bojana's work in particular is that it's powerful," Torres said. "It's such a juxtaposition, that a visually impaired artist conveys her work so dramatically, visually. Someone who doesn't even know she's visually impaired is affected."

Coklyat learned of her selection at the end of October, but says she "didn't believe it until I got the actual ornament to paint."

It finally arrived, a shiny, silver ball, about 6 or 7 inches in diameter. The only requirement was that the artist reflect the American spirit of the state she came from.

"I started thinking about people that I know and experiences I've had in New Jersey," she said. She remembered stories about the people she knew -- the fireman who was a master chef and patron of the arts, the Dunkin' Donuts worker who was going to nursing school at age 50. "I really feel like people are just so multifaceted," she said.

That's what she wanted her ornament to reflect. It turned into a difficult project -- Coklyat has some sight, but her canvas this time was much smaller than what she usually works on. Plus, she said, the glare from the shine made it even harder. But she forged ahead.

She worked on it until 5 the morning of her deadline. She glued some rhinestones onto it, and poured "liquid glass" on it to generate a gleam. "It's not gaudy, but it's almost on the verge. Which in Jersey," she said with a laugh, "we walk a fine line."

After she sent it off, she got the call that the White House would be having a reception for all the artists. So she attended last week, taking her brother with her. "That was absolutely surreal," she said. First lady Laura Bush made a speech about the American spirit, she said.

"Just being there with all these other people from the other 50 states, everybody felt just how much of an honor it was," she said. "It was just amazing to feel connected to your countrymen! It was just super-great."