

On March 10, 2020, my life changed as my office was sent home to work due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The world shut down for most of us in one sense or another. Relationships with family, coworkers, friends, doctors, and everyone else switched to virtual relationships—relationships without physical, in-person contact. Being artistically creative has always had a calming effect that allowed me to find peace with myself and the world, even when it is in chaos. I have always called art my therapy. But I was blindsided as I watched galleries that carried my artwork close; some even went out of business for good. My creative outlet and my therapy of creating art for galleries was stifled, and I would have to figure out how to navigate art and my contributions to the art world differently.

With all this time at home, I begin to contemplate my life and the craziness of the world around me. The pandemic, politics, the George Floyd murder, the Black Lives Matter Movement, the messed-up reality of social media—the world seemed to be exploding. I reflected on the diversity training I had taken at MUSC and the fact that I was a member of the Safe Zone Advisory Council; what did this all mean in those contexts? I am not sure where the motivation came from—perhaps it was simply the bad things happening in the world—but I began to focus on understanding my voice, my privileges, what was missing from my world, and what I felt was needed in this world.

I began reading for a large part of my free time. The books I read showed everyday people living a healthy normal life, but these everyday people happened to be gay. I then came up with the insane idea that over the next year, I would paint one hundred portraits that were inspired by photography of gay men or gay icons. Even without gallery representation, I decided to create my own art show once this project was done and share it with my community.

It was not until I was well into both my readings and paintings that I realized that I was creating the representation that had been missing from my life and my childhood as I sought to figure out who I was as a gay man. Growing up in the 1970s, gay people were portrayed in negative and unhealthy ways. There was not positive representation for the gay community for me growing up, and as I worked, I slowly began to understand that my new project was helping heal the 13-year-old version of myself. Through my choice of readings, I was creating the world that should have been—a world full of positive gay role models. And through my art, I was creating a body of work that helped celebrate and tell the stories of gay communities.

In the midst of this, several opportunities surfaced that allowed me to help make a change for others. As an employee of the Chair's office for the Department of Surgery, I joined the Department's Diversity Committee, where we seek to keep an open dialog of diversity issues not only in the department but the outside community. We have hosted speakers to educate our employees about the lives of people who face diversity issues. And recently, we started a diversity social series to help celebrate the heritages of the various minority communities in our world.

Additionally, the Safe Zone Advisory Council was given the opportunity to produce a series of diversity talks and host speakers to provide diversity training for all of the MUSC Enterprise employees. These talks give a platform for the voices of the LGBTQ+ community to be heard. I joined a committee to help create these talks, and together, we produced eight virtual diversity talks that included guest speakers from the MUSC, South Carolina, and national communities. For me, the highlight of these talks was Harlan Greene, a local Charleston historian, who gave a talk about the history of the Charleston LGBTQ+ community. I learned so much from this talk, and I was so grateful to see my community represented in a way I had not experienced at work. (A recording of this talk along with all the other talks can be found of MyQuest.)

I was also given the opportunity to give two talks to my department about the challenges I have faced in my life being a gay man—one at the department's staff forum and one at an M&M meeting. These talks were a new experience for me as I articulated my truth to the audience, and it was my own voice that was heard advocating on behalf of my community. The feedback that I received was extremely rewarding, and I do not believe I would have been able to undertake these new challenging responsibilities without the healing work I did during the pandemic using my art.

Recently, I had a conversation with my therapist about my life during the pandemic, and I noted that this period has been one of growth for me in many ways. Through this growth, I hope that I have not only been able to heal myself but also made a difference in someone else's life through my art and work with MUSC's diversity teams. Ultimately, I believe that this is what is needed in this world: awareness, understanding, and representation of the LGBTQ+ community for everyone, and I hope to continue to provide this for myself and others.