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# Mississippi in Technicolor: Portraits of Strength

Devna Bose
*University of Mississippi*

MISSISSIPPI IN TECHNICOLOR: PORTRAITS OF STRENGTH

by
Devna Bose

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Approved by

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Advisor: Professor Curtis Wilkie

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Reader: Assistant Professor Brian Foster

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Reader: Associate Dean Jennifer Parsons

Dedication:

To *The Daily Mississippian* and its staff, for allowing me to spill my words in ink across its pages for the past four years and write about the people and place of my heart.

But especially to the land of my bones, the state that made me —

to you, Mississippi, with love.

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Finally, thank you, Oxford and all of your colorful citizens, for being my home and my family.

ABSTRACT
Mississippi in Technicolor: Portraits of Strength
(Under the direction of Curtis Wilkie)

This thesis is a collection of my articles that have been published over four years at *The Daily Mississippian*, the university's student newspaper. In these articles, I explore the many facets of the queer community in Oxford and Mississippi.

These stories allow a glimpse into the modern queer community of Mississippi and examine the issues that often affect them. It is not an academic paper — it is merely an examination of the people and places that contribute to the Mississippi LGBTQ+ community. It includes stories about social issues, intersectionality, and legislature in relation to the queer population of this state, and profiles of the people who have contributed to it. This project is propelled by a deep love for Mississippi and its people, and a desire for it to be better.

This thesis paints portraits of the state's vibrant queer community and demonstrates the many ways in which they are changing Mississippi.

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**Preface:**

Though it wasn't always, my interest in the topic of Southern queer pride seems obvious now — my love for my home state and my identity is closely intertwined.

Over the course of my college career in journalism, I gravitated, as is human tendency, toward writing stories that I related to, which I found were often about the queer community in Mississippi. During my four years at the university, I documented queer life in the South — from art shows, to movie screening, to pride parades — stories that were my own as much as my subjects.

A common theme I discovered was resiliency and community. The South has historically looked past the "queerness" of certain members of its community, simply to keep them included. Not isolated but never fully accepted, these members frequently did and continue to make communities for themselves, in which they fight for representation and visibility.

As I grew to accept my queerness as an integral part of my being, I met people who did the same in this state, with the help of this state and its people. These are their stories — about their fears, their successes, their defeats, their sacrifices, their pride, their strength, and their love for Mississippi and desire for it to be better.

**Introduction:**

The history of homosexuality in the South is laced with complications and thinly veiled language, but the presence of LGBTQ+ Southerners has existed as long as the South has existed. Though Mississippi is and has long been considered one of America's most oppressive states, the queer community has thrived in Mississippi for years — though their stories often fraught with complications and pain — and it has only become more visible and gained more strength in the past decade. A new generation of queer youth has demanded more visibility and solidarity than in years past, creating structures dedicated to allowing the LGBTQ+ community space to openly and relatively safely be themselves and publicly acknowledging their identities and sexualities.

According to John Howard's *Men Like That,* much to the surprise of national gay and lesbian activists, queer organizing in the 1960s and onward in Mississippi "increasingly relied on church tradition" and "queer Mississippians found a new ease in melding queer sexuality with Christian spirituality" (Howard). In the same way, this generation's queer community in Mississippi has members who have clung to their religion as a way to justify their sexuality instead of deny it. Queer youth of color, in an increasingly divisive and dangerous political climate, have explored the intersection of their race and sexuality, finding beauty in living within their hyphens of individuality, as those before them did, like the late Aaron Henry, state president of the NAACP during

the civil rights movement, who was “arrested for homosexual sodomy or disorderly conduct on at least four occasions” (Howard).

The queer community in Mississippi is fiercely protective of its own, borrowing from a complex Southern culture that insists on “hospitality” and taking care of its people. The road has not been easy, but it has been forged by the queer individuals who came before us. They have provided a history of activism and foundation of legitimacy that the queer youth of today has only built upon. The history is undeniable — still, the notion persists that homosexuality is “new” and that Southern-ness and queerness are not inherently tied. According to the Williams Institute of the University of California, Mississippi is home to approximately 60,000 LGBTQ+ adults, and 3,500 same-sex couples. Of those same-sex couples, 31% of the individuals are people of color. Queer Southerners almost always closely identify with both the place they came from and who they love, no matter the struggles that have come along with both.

The following stories of strength set out to prove the diversity and resiliency of the queer community in Mississippi, and its continued path toward being seen and accepted. The people on whom they focus also demonstrate a love for their community, both in region and sexuality, and the traditions that molded them through both of their histories. Through multiple interviews, intimate portraits, and personal accounts, each story represents a facet of the queer community in the South and its endurance in the face of hardship. My conclusion is that Mississippi, though long considered a state in “reverse,” is a place where a deeply passionate and empowered queer community thrives, despite popular belief.

## I. Faces of intersectionality: Stories of black queer women in the South

*This story was published in the October 11, 2018, special issue of The Daily Mississippian. The experiences of black lesbians in Mississippi deserve to be told and heard, and as the intersection of these identities has changed these women, they have changed Oxford. Additionally, one of the women in this piece unintentionally quoted the title of "A Fly in Buttermilk," a short story by renowned gay black author James Baldwin. In the piece about race, Baldwin says, "I did not say what I was thinking, that our troubles were the same trouble and that, unless we were very swift and honest, what is happening in the South today will be happening in the North tomorrow" (Baldwin).*

**Sha' Simpson**

"I'll put it to you like this," Sha' Simpson says, leaning back in her chair and defiantly looking me straight in the eyes. "For me, being a woman of color, being a lesbian — and then being a woman, period — to certain people can be intimidating. I'm just locked and loaded to already being looked at as being different."

But Simpson refuses to apologize to anyone for that.

Simpson, a 2014 graduate of the University of Mississippi, has identified as a lesbian for as long as she can remember. However, growing up a follower of Jehovah's Witnesses, it was hard for her to reconcile her religion and her sexuality early on.

"I dealt with a lot growing up, and there were very pivotal times in my life where I thought I was getting to the point where I was comfortable enough to just go ahead and come out to my mom, but there was always something that came up," she said. "We went to our church meetings, and then I'd pull back and say, 'Nah, they just talked about this the other night.'"

Her world was "turned upside down" after her family found out about her sexuality halfway through her junior year in college. Not only did Simpson's family ostracize her, but she was also ex-communicated by her church in her hometown of New Albany.

"I'll never forget it. My mom called me while I was at work and she was like, 'Are you coming home when you get off? Because we need to talk about something,'" she said. "When I got home my mom was sitting on my bed with my laptop and my birthday card from my girlfriend at the time, and she just tosses it at me and is like, 'So what is this?'"

After admitting to her mother that she was a lesbian, Simpson said the two "got into it really bad."

It was the weekend of Simpson's 21st birthday.

Simpson grabbed her car keys and left. She came back a few days later, but her mother had already reached out to church elders. Within a week, Simpson was alone — isolated from her church and her family.

That's when Ole Miss, a place where Simpson had never felt particularly welcome, became a home.

She said she received glares "looking like a lesbian," and she still remembers comments about the color of her skin heard during her time at the university. Despite these attitudes, she created her own support system with her friends and professors at the university.

"Teachers never know the roles they play in their students' lives, and without Alysia Steele, Vanessa Gregory and Ellen Meacham, I wouldn't have finished school," Simpson said, tearing up. "I don't know where I would be."

Those three professors, along with others in the journalism school, became like guardians to Simpson, especially Steele, who says she loves Simpson as her daughter, though their relationship had a rocky start.

"Honestly speaking, she started out as a difficult student. She had major attitude, and that was apparent on the first day of class. She used to sit in the back of the room and just look at me," Steele said. "We locked eyes, actually. But she learned very quickly that the attitude was going to have to go or we were going to have a difficult time working together."

But Steele saw potential in her, something that allowed Simpson to grow in the classroom and in her personal life.

“I’ve watched Sha’ mature into a beautiful person. She’s serious about her work, her reputation, and she works hard. She has an incredible work ethic and believes in doing her absolute best, and I admire that about her. For Sha’, her word is her bond,” Steele said. “I expect great things from Sha’ Simpson. And if I were looking at her right now, we’d be locking eyes on that last statement, and she knows it.”

Though those years of Simpson’s life are over, that doesn’t mean she isn’t still struggling with coming to terms with them.

“It’s not something that just goes away. We’re at the point where I’m talking about grieving over the loss of someone who is still living (her parents),” she said. “That’s the biggest issue, and it’s a constant reminder.”

However, it has allowed Simpson to appreciate what she considers her greatest attribute: strength.

“I was just really empowered after I came out. I think once your mom and your parents know, regardless of what you go through with them, forget everybody else and what they have to say,” she said. “Some of the things that my mom said to me brought me to the point where no one else could break me.”

Her relationship with the university is complicated. At times, it has been a place where she’s been made to feel unwelcome, but it’s a home for her all the same.

“I definitely think if I would have been anything than what I am, my negative experiences would have been less,” she said. “But if it had not been for those things, I wouldn’t have been molded and shaped into the person I am today. “

**Deja Samuel**

“When I first got here, it wasn’t like a culture shock, but it was just like, clearly I’m going to stand out because I’m a black woman in a majority white class, so I think I could’ve let it make me feel left out,” she said, glancing out of the window.

Though she said this softly, nothing about Deja Samuel is quiet.

“But I didn’t let it stop me. If those intentions were there to make me feel left out, I didn’t take them to heart because I had my own intentions,” Samuel said.

Samuel is confidence embodied, from the slim rings on her fingers to the embroidered loafers on her feet.

She enrolled at the University of Mississippi six years ago as a biology and theatre double major before pursuing an art degree.

“That’s why I’ve been here so long,” she said, laughing.

And her time at Ole Miss has been essential to her identity and her growth as a human.

“Here, I found a type of confidence in being okay with not knowing who I am or just being whoever I want to be,” she said.

Samuel only started to feel comfortable in her own space after the first time she felt unwelcome in Oxford.

Covering the state flag protests as a photographer for The Daily Mississippian, she realized “a lot of people don’t want us (black people) here.”

She felt this same exclusion the first time she walked through the Grove before a football game

“I realized, like, that I’m not really wanted or welcome here. No one said anything to me — it was just due to the way people kind of talk to you,” she said. “I don’t know, it’s an energy that you can sense just walking through there.”

She hasn’t been back since her freshman year.

Samuel’s sexuality and blackness, both inherent parts of her identity, have been sources of discrimination for Samuel while she’s been in Oxford.

She remembers a night when she and an ex-girlfriend were catcalled and called “dykes” on the Square.

But it’s rare that she feels uncomfortable anymore because she doesn’t allow herself to be. Just as the gay community here has made a space for themselves, she said, she has made one for herself.

“We’ve created a community here, and I think that we have made our own space here,” she said. “When I first came here, I really felt invisible. I felt outnumbered, but now I don’t really care because I’m here to do what I’m here to do.”

She feels like everyone should be seen, so she uses her photography to do that for others.

“We’re all different in so many ways, but ultimately, we are just reflections of each other,” she said. “I feel like a lot of people just want to be heard and seen and valued and know that they’re important and not as insignificant as we may feel sometimes.”

Much of Samuel’s work focuses on her experience as a queer, black Southern woman. Her newly completed first photobook, “Things in Place,” captures LGBTQ people and couples and their experiences here in Oxford. Another project she’s working on is about valuing female vulnerability.

“It started out as a body-positive, kind of serious thing,” she said. “It transformed into me just talking to women and getting them to tell their stories.”

Samuel thinks the title of her own story would be “something like ‘Becoming and Unbecoming.’”

“I feel like I’ve stripped off so many layers. It’s just a continuous cycle — me finding myself and losing myself and just going through life and learning,” she said.

Not only does she use her photography to explore the various facets of her identity, but she also uses it to communicate how she feels about others and what's happening around her.

"Photography was, at first, just a way for me to capture memories, but then it became a way of communicating," she said. "It's my way to communicate to people, 'This is how I see you,' because I feel like I see the best in people."

Her girlfriend of nearly a year, Jana Entrekin, said that is her favorite quality about Samuel — breaking others' walls down, allowing her to see deeper into them.

"There's something about her that makes people very willingly take down their walls," she said. "I feel like this is also her most visible quality because you can see it in almost all of her portraits she takes."

Samuel still only feels seen in certain spaces and sometimes only as a photographer or an artist.

"But as just Deja… not really."

**JoJo Brown**

"I'm just a 20-year-old African-American gay female who is trying to be a dentist one day, who plays the violin in her spare time, looking to make a change in the world," JoJo Brown says, eyes bright.

It is with this optimism that Brown does everything — it is foundational to her being.

“(JoJo) wants people to remember her for a good reason,” her girlfriend Tk Smith said. “She wants to leave a mark on them. A good mark.”

The Ole Miss junior has been “fully out since middle school,” and Brown is adamant that her comfort in her own skin is what has made others comfortable around her.

“My sexuality has never been an issue. I go to interviews with a suit and tie on and come out with positions that anyone else would have,” she said. “My sexuality has never held me back on this campus, and I won’t let that happen.”

In fact, coming to Ole Miss was freeing for Brown.

“I’m more comfortable here than I am at home. I’m surrounded by people who love me and have always supported my choice of lifestyle,” she said. “This was freedom for me.”

However, race is a different story.

“Sexuality is something you can hide, not that I do, ever,” she said. “Race is something that you can see. My sexuality has not held me back from anything, but definitely the color of my skin has allowed me to be placed in uncomfortable positions.”

As a biology major, she often finds herself the only black person in her class.

“It’s an uncomfortable feeling,” she said. “It makes me feel like I’m already competing, like I’m already at a disadvantage.”

“You feel like the fly in the buttermilk,” Brown’s girlfriend chimed in.

However, Brown, a Madison County native, is no stranger to feeling outnumbered by white people. Her mother moved their family to the area to ensure that Brown would have a good education and opportunities that would not have been afforded to her otherwise.

“At my graduation party, my grandfather was not happy about me coming the university because of its history. I’ve heard family members say that I was going to be lynched when I got up here, making up crazy hypotheticals,” she said. “That did kind of scare me, but Madison Central was a predominantly white school. I was used to being in that environment.”

Throughout her college experience, Brown remembers sorority girls on her dormitory floor asking her if they could borrow her chain for a swap.

“That was uncomfortable, seeing the way people interpret our culture,” she said, eyes turned down. “It’s sad. It’s degrading.”

Recently, Brown attended the open forum held for the university community to discuss the comments made by Ed Meek on Facebook about two black women, who are Ole Miss students, on the Square. Brown spoke out passionately, calling for action from the administration.

Before she leaves Ole Miss, as part of her mission to impact the spaces she occupies, Brown hopes to see higher enrollment of African-American students at the university.

“We need to reach out to those students and let them know that they have opportunities here,” she said. “They don’t have to be a part of the statistic. They should be the outlier, defy the odds.”

She thinks it’s up to the student body to spark the change that she says needs to happen in response to the Meek situation.

“We need to let the world know what’s going on here. That’s how other universities got the Confederate statues down,” she says, eyes lighting up and voice raising. “That’s what it’s going to take here.”

As for Brown, she plans to be a part of the change.

**II. The new normal: First married gay couple in Oxford considers their marriage, equality, the future**

*This story was published in the June 14, 2018, special issue of The Daily Mississippian. Corey and Kurt were the first gay couple to be married in Oxford after same-sex marriage was legalized, and they demonstrate how varied and colorful the queer community can be.*

"He's into sci-fi, fantasy, and Dr. Who, and I'm into sitcoms, Grey's Anatomy, and Orange is the New Black. We're total animal hoarders. We've got four dogs. He has chickens and goats – I'm talking Farmer freakin' Brown. He can go deer hunting, kill the deer, field dress it, start cooking a stew, and can crochet a blanket while the stew cooks."

Corey Blount beams as he rattles on about his husband of three years, Kurt Smith.

"Kurt is a jack of all trades. He's the fixer, and I do the cleaning. We don't fight. We love to go to Memphis and go to the Asian grocery stores there. We're NPR freaks – we hardly ever listen to music," he says in one breath, before summing it all up in a few words that might be easily missed because they're said so resolutely.

"He makes me want to be a better person."

**Married four years ago**

Blount and Smith were the first gay couple to obtain a marriage license in Oxford and were married in Oxford back in June 2015 when the same-sex marriage ban was first struck down. Blount remembers the day well.

“When we found out on Monday morning that it had been legalized in Mississippi, Kurt called me and asked, ‘Do you want to go to courthouse and get married?’” Blount said.

Blount said the two had talked about it over the weekend going to the grocery store, and it wasn’t until that moment that it actually became a reality for the couple. When the question arose, Blount responded, “Of course.”

After they got married, Blount came back to his office in Martindale and called his parents.

“It took them a second to wrap their heads around it,” he said. “It was quite a ride and a rush.”

Smith described it as a rare moment when the opportunity and timing were “right to do something actively without having to be an agitator.”

“We had the opportunity to do something on a human level that all people should have access and a right to for the first time,” he said. “For me, it was being able to make a statement of equality and humanity without having to make a statement of being pissed off about something.”

They hadn't planned on making history that day, which seems to be a common theme for the couple. They were just doing what any other couple in love would want to do – get married.

**'Nothing has changed'**

Three years later, Blount stresses that nothing much has changed. As I inquire more about what's been going on with the couple since that day at the courthouse, Blount says, "You're going to have a boring story because honestly, nothing changed for us."

They still live on their small farm in Denmark, a community just outside of Oxford. They still live with a menagerie of animals, according to Blount. They've just gotten more dogs. "Life is normal," he says. But that is exactly how it should be.

"I think it's been a victory for the cause of equality that we've set a new baseline for normalcy," Smith said. "Generations of kids nowadays don't have to live in a world where [same-sex marriage] is a battle and a dividing line. They're going to get married with the same blasé normalcy that their parents had."

Blount said one of the couple's goals is to "normalize stuff."

"Yes, it is important to have recognition of the past and what we need to do as a society to grow, but we're normal people," he says. "We present ourselves as normal everyday people, so there was absolutely nothing that changed for us [after we got married]. Life is still just school and work."

Blount, an Access Services Coordinator/Interpreter at UM, and Smith, project coordinator for the Office of Global Engagement on campus, are both working on their PhD degrees, and spend much of their time on their respective jobs or schoolwork or pushing each other to achieve their best.

**Puzzle pieces**

Described by Blount as "two puzzle pieces," the couple couldn't be more different.

Smith is quiet and reserved, while Blount's vivaciousness is obvious on first encounter. Their hobbies starkly contrast, as Smith prefers outdoor activities and Blount prefers being indoors. Blount's conversations are hilariously dotted with "bless your heart"s while Smith prefers to state how he feels matter-of-factly.

"We don't like doing anything together," Smith joked, before catching a stern look from Blount.

"He's so wonderful and patient, and I am not so patient," Blount explained. "I'm very Irish and emotional, and sometimes I say things I shouldn't. There's no filter sometimes. We're perfect complements of each other. Everything the other is not, the other is. We fit."

Though their differences are stark, somehow they're compatible, a unique characteristic that isn't lost on those around the couple. Their colleague and friend Robin Yekaitis said that the two's relationship thrives off their contrasting personalities and interests.

“I do think they value each other’s faith and time. Both of them will do little surprises for each other, which can be making a special dinner one night or writing a poem,” she said. “They have different interests but their interests also work together.”

Smith agrees that these differences are the opposite of a detriment to their relationship – they bring the couple closer together.

“I don’t think it’s about finding common ground. Relationships are about being with somebody who is different from you or else you sit around all day agreeing with each other,” Smith said. “He challenges me, and I challenge him. We have interesting discussions and opinions, and we balance each others’ lives out.”

**A shared faith**

One thing the couple shares is their faith, a theme that has remained constant throughout their relationship.

“I prayed really hard when we first got together,” Blount said.

Smith was raised Pentecostal, and Blount grew up Southern Baptist, but both converted to Catholicism later in life. Though Blount jokingly refers to himself and Smith as “lazy sinners” who don’t go to church as much as they should, their faith is something they both value.

In fact, Blount believes it’s their duty as a religious couple to show everyone that God is love and what they have together is love.

“I think Christianity sometimes had a bad reputation,” Blount said. “Christianity is love, and, bless our hearts, we don’t always show it.”

**Looking ahead**

Looking towards the future, the couple is starting to talk about children and building a new home, topics they didn’t really think about before they were married.

As for Oxford, they want to call it their home for many years to come.

“I never thought I’d get married to a guy in Oxford, but here we are three years after it. I think we have come a long way,” he said. “Hopefully in the next few years we’re going to buy some land and build a house. The one we have now is pretty old. We want something that’s ours because we love it here. We want to retire here in Oxford. This is where we want to be.”

While they’ve lived here, the couple says that they’ve never had a negative experience, but they acknowledge, “Where there are people, there will be hate.”

“Where there are differences there will always be someone who doesn’t like that difference,” Blount said. “That is the same with us and our relationship and our marriage. Wherever there is a minority, there are going to be people who want to keep that minority oppressed. While strides can be made, we’re always going to be an imperfect society.”

Regardless, Blount’s goal is to continue spreading love and understanding in his community, answering invasive, ignorant questions with compassion.

“Society as a whole in accepting difference and understanding individuals, we’re certainly a lot further along that what we started with. In the South, yeah, it’s hard, and you’ve got the people who don’t want to bake the cakes.”

Blount looks at me, rolls his eyes and delivers, “Well, then, don’t go to them to get your damn cake, child.”

## III. Violet Valley Bookstore is a beacon of hope, pride, love for LGBTQ community

*This story was published in the June 14, 2018, special issue of The Daily Mississippian. Violet Valley Bookstore is one of the few gay and feminist bookstores in the country, and it's located in north Mississippi. It's a passion project of Jaime Harker, the director of the university's Sarah Isom Center, who emphasized the importance of the existence of bookstores like hers for queer people to have inclusive spaces where they feel safe. The visibility of businesses like Violet Valley lead to increased visibility for the queer community, which is integral to the community's development.*

Almost smack dab in the middle of North Main Street in the sleepy, pastel-hue town of Water Valley a few miles down the road from Oxford, a tiny bookstore stands defiantly with a pride flag in its window, like it's daring you to come inside.

Violet Valley Bookstore officially made its grand opening in February 2018, and it's been open every Friday and Saturday since.

The project of Jaime Harker, an English professor and the director of the Sarah Isom Center for Women and Gender Studies at the University of Mississippi, opening the bookstore has been her long-time dream.

“Anyone who loves books has always dreamed of opening a bookstore, so in some sense, it was always in the back of my mind,” she said.

Harker’s home of nine years, Water Valley, is going through something of a downtown revitalization, becoming a real art hub of northern Mississippi. Several women have recently started businesses on Main Street, including Annette Trefzer, who is the owner of Bozart’s Gallery, and Harker’s wife Dixie Grimes, who is co-owner of BTC Old-Fashioned Grocery.

“I had a lot of good role models,” she said. “When the space became available, it seemed like the perfect opportunity to take a chance.”

The narrow space located directly next to BTC has housed everything from barbers to paintings before finally becoming the home of shelves upon shelves of queer literature. The bookstore is an “education nonprofit,” meaning its purpose is to provide inexpensive literature to the community.

Harker, who identifies as a lesbian, said that even though the bookstore is not related to Ole Miss in any way, it is “absolutely connected to her work as a feminist and queer scholar.” Feminist and LGBTQ bookstores were integral to Harker as she was growing up and coming out.

Southern lesbian feminists and their connection to the Women in Print movement, the subject of Harker’s latest book, inspired her.

“These women wrote their own books, started their own publishing houses, and opened bookstores because they believed it was necessary and important,” she said. “They taught themselves how to do everything, made up their own rules…they were groundbreaking in so many ways. And I thought: they did this without any of the advantages that I have. They inspired me to take a chance, too.”

The only other paid employee of Violet Valley Bookstore, Ellis Starkey calls themself “the book person.” Starkey has been with Violet Valley since its beginning, watching it become the welcoming, and inclusive space for so many that it is today.

“We have several kids who act like they own the place. They come in, grab some candy from the bowl by the register, grab a book, and sprawl out on the chair,” they said. “[The bookstore] is inspired by all of the people we know who just need a space to be themselves.”

Kendrick Wallace understands that feeling. An Ole Miss student, he describes Violet Valley as a place where he feels welcome.

“It’s a place you can come to and just feel normal,” he said. “You can walk in with your significant other, and you can hold hands with them, browse books together and not feel like someone looks at you in a weird way. It’s just unencumbered by views from other people.”

Harker’s mission was just that – to give the LGBTQ community a space to exist in the South, physically and literarily.

“In the South, especially the rural South, queer people are frequently invisible. That doesn’t mean they aren’t there – but people tend to talk about it in code,” she said. “This can make queer folks, especially queer youth, feel like they are the only people in the world, that there is no one like them – except maybe in a big city far away.”

Oftentimes when they do hear about gay people, it is through “denunciations from the pulpit or homophobic slurs at school,” according to Harker.

“This puts gay youth at enormous risk – of suicide, of homelessness, of depression,” she said. “Those who survive move away, even though many love the South and would like to stay. But they feel it is impossible to be who they are in their home communities.”

Starkey said that in a way, they’re fighting the “brain drain,” the wave of talented young professionals leaving Mississippi.

“There have been a flood of messages from people who grew up in Mississippi and moved away for one reason or the other and reached out and said if they had a place like [Violet Valley], they might have stayed in Mississippi,” they said. “We’re just doing our part, trying to be kind.”

Emails come from places as far away from New York or California, and donations of boxes filled with books have been delivered from all over the country.

Starkey explained that throughout history, queer people have constantly had to make their own space through events or parades, but many of those welcoming spaces are only

temporary. Violet Valley is a more permanent home and resource for the LGBTQ community.

“Code Pink pops up one Thursday a semester and is bright and loud and beautiful, but then it disappears again,” Starkey said. “It’s important that people have a place to come that they depend on, and they can ask questions that they couldn’t ask at their local library or school counselor but hopefully feel safe asking us.”

Though it isn’t the first, as of right now, Violet Valley Bookstore in the only queer feminist bookstore in the state, further proving the importance of its existence.

“There aren’t a lot of visibly queer spaces in Mississippi. That is slowly starting to change; Pride parades are beginning to happen across the state, including Oxford and Starkville. But that just happens once a year,” Harker said. “Violet Valley Bookstore is open all year, and it is a place to explore new ideas and find a community of folks you may not known were here.”

Harker stressed the bookstore’s increased importance as a result of recent legislation.

“It is especially necessary now, since the passage of HB 1523,” she said.

Mississippi House Bill 1523, also called the Religious Liberty Accommodations Act, was passed in 2016 in response to federal rulings legalizing same-sex marriage. It allows individuals, religious organizations, and private groups to withhold services on account of “deeply held religious beliefs or moral convictions” about marriage and gender.

“It is a law that declares open season on queer folks, and makes us feel like we can be discriminated against and singled out anytime, anywhere,” Harker said. “Having a space where we are celebrated and supported is particularly important right now.”

When the bookstore’s opening was first announced, the community reactions were mixed, but Harker said things have calmed down significantly since then. Many didn’t know what to expect initially, but have since visited the bookstore and become regulars.

For newcomers and regulars alike, Harker wants each visitor to gain a sense of possibility.

“I can’t tell you how many people come into the store and can’t quite believe that it is there. They want to know why there is an LGBTQ feminist bookstore in Water Valley, and not in Jackson, or Oxford, or some other bigger place,” Harker said. “And I say, why don’t you open one? Don’t wait for someone else. Do it yourself. Remake the world the way you believe it should be.”

For many years to come, Harker hopes, Violet Valley will continue existing as a beacon of hope and pride and love.

“Violet Valley Bookstore is a place that says to queer youth, and the LGBTQ community as a whole: we want you here. You’re welcome here,” Harker said. “You are part of a vast and beautiful tribe, and we love you because of who you are, not in spite of it.”

## IV. Oxford LGBT leaders respond to barred Starkville Pride Parade

*This story was published in the February 23, 2018, issue of The Daily Mississippian. The Starkville Board of Aldermen went on to reverse their decision and the town's pride parade was one of the most widely attended in its history. Events like pride parades have historically allowed queer communities visibility and solidarity, as well as a moment to celebrate their individuality. Not only did it force Starkville's community to band together, but also it brought together communities all over the state, including Oxford's.*

After the Starkville Board of Aldermen meeting Tuesday night, Bailey McDaniel cried, heartbroken.

The aldermen voted 4-3 to deny a special event request to allow the city to host an LGBTQ Pride Parade on March 24, 2018, as part of Starkville's first Pride celebration, which McDaniel, director of grassroots community organization Starkville Pride, has been planning for a year. McDaniel, along with her partner, Emily Turner, was hopeful when she put forth the application.

"We found out over the weekend that the application might be taken off consent," McDaniel said.

The item was initially on the consent agenda, where most items are typically approved, but was pulled off by Vice Mayor and Ward 6 Alderman Roy Perkins at the beginning of the meeting.

Perkins, a Starkville attorney, made a motion to deny the request. The motion was approved with a 4-3 vote. Perkins, Ward 1 Alderman Ben Carver, Ward 3 Alderman David Little and Ward 7 Alderman Henry Vaughn voted in favor of denying the request. Little was the deciding vote.

Ward 2 Alderman Sandra Sistrunk moved to go into executive session to discuss prospective litigation involving the Pride Parade, but no action was taken in executive session.

“It felt like I was gutted. I was so hurt that all of my planning and all our work for the parade came to a simple ‘no,’” McDaniel said. “I felt like my life didn’t matter, that the community that I was a part of and had fought for, that I didn’t matter to them.”

Since Tuesday’s vote, Starkville Pride has decided to take legal action in defending their right to parade. Attorney Roberta Kaplan will represent McDaniel and the rest of the Pride Parade supporters.

**Oxford organizations, leaders react**

The board’s decision has received national attention and prompted a statewide response, including a strong one here in Oxford.

A meeting in Starkville affirmed that plans for Pride were still continuing, and Regan Willis, president of the UM Pride Network, was in attendance to stand in solidarity with Starkville's queer community.

"I am overwhelmed by the fact that Regan was able to come down," McDaniel said. "It seems like a united front from Ole Miss, the Isom program and all of these organizations. It felt so great to know that we were coming together for something that means more than what people usually see between our two schools. It was amazing – I was so touched."

Executive members from LGBTQ organizations in Oxford, including the UM Pride Network, Queer People of Color, OutLaw and OUTGrads, have met to discuss their approach to the Pride Parade issue and plan to a release a statement.

An early excerpt from the statement reads, "In light of recent events in Starkville, we, the UM Pride Collective, have been in contact with the LGBTQ+ community of Starkville and want to make clear that Starkville Pride's weekend long celebration will persist. The members of the Starkville Board of Aldermen who voted to deny the parade permit may have thought that they would dampen the spirits of Starkville Pride; however, this has served to strengthen the resolve of LGBTQ+ Mississippians, mobilizing and uniting us."

Outside of Ole Miss' campus, the rest of Oxford has reacted to the news. Although Mayor Robyn Tannehill declined to comment on the situation, OutOxford co-founders Blake Summers and Jonathan Adams voiced their dissent about the Starkville board's vote. Summers said it serves as a reminder to Oxford to continue being a model for inclusivity.

“It might be positive for us to understand that Mississippi is still in this kind of negative rut,” he said. “We’re just going to keep having Oxford be a good, inclusive environment for our community and hopefully other cities will follow, too.”

Summers questioned what excuses the aldermen would make to deny the Pride Parade request.

“I want to know the reason why. Was it a resource issue? Paying a police force?” Summers asked. “If that’s true, they need to say that. It’s a shame that they’re not more brave and positive about their community.”

Adams said the most frustrating part to him was that the aldermen who voted to deny the request would not explain why, and he hopes allies all over the state will voice their support of Starkville’s LGBTQ community.

“The parade we’ve helped organize the past two years in Oxford is a joyful day. Yes, there are maybe a few protesters standing on the route, but they are drowned out by all the allies and supporters,” he said. “I hope that all of the allies around the state will outweigh the four people in Starkville who are on the wrong side of history.”

**LGBTQ organizations at Ole Miss unify in support**

When the UM Pride Network’s GroupMe chat started “blowing up” about the aldermen’s decision, as president, Willis said he knew he had to do something. He decided to attend the meeting in Starkville.

“It was disheartening and really hit us hard. It was a call to action for me, as the president of the organization,” he said. “We felt the need to show our support and have a presence there.”

Jaime Cantrell, faculty affiliate at the Sarah Isom Center for Women’s and Gender Studies and faculty adviser for two undergraduate LGBTQ student organizations, UM Pride Network and Queer People of Color, advised Willis on what steps to take to show support for the queer community in Starkville.

“I’m especially troubled by the Starkville Board of Aldermen’s decision to press for a separate vote on the proposed Pride Parade, which, as I understand it, from in-state and nationally circulated news reports, had originally been listed on the consent agenda. What changed?” Cantrell said. “This decision seemingly suggests that the Board of Aldermen view Starkville’s LGBTQ+ community as second-class citizens and not as taxpayers, students, doctors, mothers, city workers, artists and religious leaders who have an economic impact and vested interest in creating welcoming spaces for fostering diversity and inclusion, which could only benefit the town.”

Malik Pridgeon, executive director of Queer People of Color, shared Cantrell’s sentiments, agreeing that Starkville’s Board of Aldermen is sending a negative message to the queer community.

“In all honesty, the decision by the Starkville aldermen is an overt declaration of intolerance and ignorance,” he said. “This decision shows that not only are they living in

the past, but they are woefully ignorant to the needs of visibility and inclusion of their residents."

He emphasized the need for Pride parades, especially in today's political climate "when just about everything is being done to silence dissent," and urged Oxford to show its support for its neighbors down Highway 6.

Pridgeon said Oxford can shows its support by doing things like releasing statements of affirmation or sending letters of disapproval to the city council of Starkville.

"Pride parades are a celebration of diversity and community," he said. "They are symbols to the community that we are accepting, loving and welcoming to queer people. As a queer person of color, I am reminded that people still think that they have a right to police other people's sexuality. It makes me grateful for the Oxford community and their openness to inclusion and diversity."

Willis recognized the impact that a decision like this could have not only on Starkville's community but also on LOU's, and potentially the rest of the state.

"When it comes to stuff like this, it's not just Starkville anymore," he said. "It's much larger. I definitely felt the need to be there. Our organization needed to come together. It's our state as a whole – it impacts all of us."

The UM Pride Network is planning to attend Starkville's Pride event in March to show its support.

“One thing that’s been really important to me is getting the ball moving on this,” Willis said. “This sparks so much momentum, and it’s bigger than just Starkville now. There’s so much power in that momentum. If we can keep it going, we have some great opportunities for the collective.”

**Long way to go in Starkville**

When Patrick Miller decided to run for alderman of Ward 5, he wanted to see what Starkville is and what it could be. Very quickly, however, over the course of the past few days, he’s seen the narrative become about what Starkville is not.

“The narrative is that Starkville is not progressive and close-minded, and that’s the part that’s unfortunate about it,” he said. “Personally, I thought (the decision) was heartbreaking and unfortunate and disappointing.”

He said he doesn’t see why the parade isn’t being allowed, considering that McDaniel and her partner followed all of the necessary steps required for a special event.

“I don’t think it’s about why we should have one. The question is, ‘Why wouldn’t we?’” he said. “I would love to see it get to the point that we can rescind the vote and reconsider our stance on the parade – one, because of human decency, and two, because it’ll save us, prevent us from going through a long, drawn-out litigation out of a few hours of letting a harmless group in our community have a parade.”

Miller voted to allow the Pride Parade along with Alderman Sandra Sistrunk of Ward 2. Sistrunk also expressed her disappointment in the vote and said that because there was no

explanation, only so many conclusions could be drawn about why Ward 1 Alderman Ben Carver, Ward 3 Alderman David Little, Ward 6 Alderman Roy Perkins and Ward 7 Alderman Henry Vaughn voted to deny the request.

“It bridges divides when we can get together in a fun setting. It makes a better, stronger community,” she said. “I hope that the board finds a way to reconsider their vote. I expect that if they do not find a way to, this will be taken out of the hands of the Board of Aldermen and go through the court process. At the end of the process, I think the courts will rule in favor of (Starkville Pride) and we will have a Pride Parade.”

She also expressed her disappointment in the way Starkville has been painted because of one deciding vote.

“I am very sorry that we’ve gotten to this point. I think Starkville has been painted in a light that is not representative of the community,” she said. “I think that we are a much more welcoming and diverse and inclusive community than we are painted in the many media stories that are out there right now.”

Vaughn declined to comment, and Ward 4 Alderman Jason Walker, Carver, Little and Perkins could not be reached at the time of publication. Mississippi State University has not taken a position on the vote.

**Fighting for equality**

Bailey McDaniel hasn’t been off the phone in the last 48 hours.

She's received an outpouring of support from the community and said she is grateful for all of the messages she's received.

"When I started planning Pride, it was meant to make a difference. I wish it would be easy – get approved, start a parade. This has become something so much bigger and so much more than we had planned, but this might be better for the state and the city and country and the people," McDaniel said. "I'm just excited for the opportunity to move forward and make sure that we are given our rights and we are allowed to have a parade. I am hopeful that this will impact some kind of change bigger than we've originally planned."

The ACLU responded to the board's decision Wednesday, warning the board that its actions potentially violate the First Amendment and the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment and urging it to reconsider. The statement, which can be attributed to the ACLU of Mississippi Executive Director Jennifer Riley-Collins, said, "The government cannot prevent a parade or event simply because it promotes LGBTQ pride or because its organizers and marchers are LGBTQ. In addition, the government cannot treat people unequally because they are LGBTQ. This is exactly what the Board of Alderman did, and that is discrimination, plain and simple. It also violates the Constitution.

"It is disappointing and disturbing that the Starkville Board of Alderman would decide to treat LGBTQ people differently from everyone else. The ACLU of Mississippi, therefore, urges the Starkville Board of Alderman to reconsider their decision and approve the request."

Attorney Roberta Kaplan of Kaplan & Company, LLP who will be taking on the case to represent Starkville Pride director Bailey McDaniel and the rest of the group. Kaplan has tried cases involving LGBTQ rights and marriage equality in Mississippi and has represented the Campaign for Southern Equality in a constitutional challenge to Mississippi's HB 1523, which many consider to be an anti-LGBTQ "religious freedom law."

In the meantime, McDaniel will keep fighting for what she believes in.

"I hope that in the city of Starkville and every city in Mississippi, you don't get to tell someone you don't have right because you don't agree with them," she said. "I hope we can move forward and have a kick-ass Pride."

## V. First Big Gay Art Show illustrates shared identity, experience of Southern LGBTQ community

*This story was published in the September 28, 2017, issue of The Daily Mississippian. The inaugural art show created a space for members of the local LGBTQ+ community to showcase their work and pride in their identities.*

Last year, co-creators of OutOxford Jonathan Kent Adams and Blake Summers, in collaboration with the Sarah Isom Center for Women and Gender Studies and the Powerhouse, came up with the idea of an art show that celebrated the local LGBTQ community. That idea came to fruition in the form of the Big Gay Art Show.

The first Big Gay Art Show has been up and running for the month of September 2017, boasting more than 50 pieces.

This will be the first fine art exhibit that OutOxford, which Summers and Adams started to bring more opportunities for LGBTQ exposure in Oxford, has sponsored.

A long-time artist, Adams reached out to some younger, lesser-known LGBTQ artists, including Deja Samuel and Jake Thrasher, among others, from the Oxford-University community to show their work in the exhibit. The result is a combination of 10 artists' varied work. The exhibit features everything from ceramics to photography, and each

piece ties together the show by sharing the overarching theme of the exhibit — the queer person's experience in the South.

"I wanted to tell a story that was serious, playful and honest. I think that is what viewers saw at the Big Gay Art Show," Adams said. "I believe in the power of art to make individuals think and look outside of their own perspective. I believe there are several moments in this show where that happens."

Around 300 people visited the reception Tuesday night, taking part in the welcoming, introspective atmosphere.

"The art show was easily a success," Summers said. "We had more than our expected demographic come out and support the art crawl in its entirety. It was great exposure for us. We had it all — art, spoken poetry, food, a drag queen, installations and a gin-themed beverage."

The exhibit challenges viewers from all walks of life, exposing them to a version of Oxford's collective queer identity.

"Talking about art opens the air. You get to find ways to relate about life experiences and sometimes a person you disagree with," Summers said. "Pain is pain. Triumphs are joyful. Emotional communication is what makes art breathe, and we hope our curation was a bread crumb trail to understanding."

Senior chemistry major Jake Thrasher, who is featuring two of his pieces in the exhibit, emphasized the important of a queer art show in the small community of Oxford.

“I think art exhibits that show diversity, especially in small towns, have a large impact on the perception of the town to insiders and outsiders,” he said.

Adams has a “sassy” self portrait piece in the exhibit that summarizes his thoughts toward our modern political environment and how that has already shaped the LGBTQ identity of the South.

“It’s a self portrait with a flag in it, and the flag is a part of me as well as the painting. I feel like with the new kind of political environment with Trump being in the White House, there is a movement of people who are anti-LGBT,” he said. “Yes, I might not like what’s going on, but this place is just as much mine as it is yours. You can take rights away, but you can’t take my identity away from me. That painting is me claiming that.”

The exhibit also documents important moments in LGBTQ history in Oxford, like the first gay pride parade two years ago.

“Blake’s boots that he put rhinestones on for pride, that’s a part of the exhibit. I love how if you go to a museum, art can show history, and we tried to do that, too,” he said. “That piece is about that moment in Oxford.”

The duo hopes that people from all walks of life will leave the exhibit with changed perspectives.

“I left the event full of joy. Seeing the indiscriminate community come together over these last two events has really improved my personal morale,” Summers said. “The

South is becoming alright. Southerners have a beautiful tradition of love and a foundation of hospitality. I see it every day. I think Mississippi can grow to be a place for everyone. We just have to keep using our paints and glue guns and respect each other until that day comes."

In the political climate of the nation and the community, it is more important than ever to Adams to bring the local community together using his passion for art.

"I think it's cool that queer people can have a space to show people what they have and the community in return shows support. The coolest part for me, as an artist, was getting to showcase other artists' work that I believe have the potential to grow and have powerful messages in the current political climate," Adams said. "If you're not a part of the LGBT community, I hope that you are challenged in some way or relate to it in some way because that's what art does — it connects us."

## VI. 'Small Town Gay Bar' tells stories about Mississippi queer communities

*This story was published on The Daily Mississippian website on February 19, 2017. A documentary about gay bars in Mississippi was screened at the 2017 Oxford Film Festival, and individuals from the film were a part of a panel following the screening. The documentary and its subjects illustrated the significance of inclusive spaces in places that are not historically inclusive. In the safety of these "small town gay bars," their patrons became sub-communities.*

"Small Town Gay Bar," a 2006 documentary that tells the story of two gay bars in Mississippi and the communities that convene there on weekend nights, played at the 2017 Oxford Film Festival at the Malco Oxford Commons with a panel featuring the director and documentary subjects from the film directly afterwards.

Malcolm Ingram's documentary visits two bars, Rumors, in Shannon, and Crossroads, in Meridian. Interviews with the patrons reveal the extent of the refuge that the two bars provided and still provide for the gay community in the Bible Belt.

A Toronto native, Ingram filmed the documentary during the course of December 2004, and it became a part of his own coming-out process.

“One of the things that really attracted me to the notion of a small-town gay bar was the concept of community,” Ingram said. “I really liked the fact that this was a small-town gay bar.”

Ingram’s hometown boasts all types of different bars for the LGBTQ+ community, but in a small town, the gay population is more compressed and forced to become a community.

“What I really love, essentially, is that in a small-town gay bar, there’s one bar,” he said. “Everyone’s got to get along and appreciate, respect and love the concept of this one umbrella that everyone has to get along under and create a community.”

The documentary begins by focusing on Rumors but travels across the state to Crossroads, a much rowdier establishment. It later touches on the murder of Scotty Weaver, an 18-year-old from Bay Minette, Alabama, whose sexual orientation was a factor in his brutal death.

“For me, it was just that I owned a bar,” the then-owner of Rumors, Rick Gladish, said. “I worked a full-time job, and three nights a week, I went and put up with drag queens and a lot of drunk kids. But it was a fun adventure. That was eight years of my life that I truly enjoyed.”

Now Rumors is a church, and at this fact Gladish sassily commented, “At least people are still on their knees.”

Controversial commentary from American Baptist minister Fred Phelps is featured in the film, juxtaposed with tongue-in-cheek humor from members of the small-town Mississippi gay community.

“By the very nature of small-town gay bars, a lot of people don’t want to be filmed. We didn’t even know what we were going to get when we came down here,” Ingram said. “We had no idea what was going to happen, but in one month, we had a gay bar transitioning, a gay bar reopening and so much activity happening in that period. It was a wonderful thing to witness.”

The film features honest, raw and sometimes-sassy commentary from regulars at the two bars who describe the joints as “my escape from reality.”

The bars are safe havens of bright lights, colorful drinks and outrageous garb surrounded by towering Mississippi pines and red clay. They’re places where anything goes and the clientele feel safe—a feeling that can be rare in some Deep South towns.

“The people we met, their absolute honesty and the journeys they have been on…It was a privilege to make this film,” Ingram said.

## VII. To Jonathan Kent Adams, art, God and love are sacred

*This story was published in the November 15, 2017, issue of The Daily Mississippian. Jonathan Kent Adams, a local artist and devout Christian, has struggled with reconciling his religion and sexuality for much of his life. Very recently has he started to come to terms with it, and instead of thinking of the two identities in opposition, he's drawn from his religion to begin to finally accept himself fully.*

Jonathan Kent Adams has always seen life in technicolor.

"He saw beauty and color in everything, almost like he had a kaleidoscope view of life," his mother, Ann, said about him as a child. "His heart was full of love for everyone."

And it still is. Ole Miss graduate Adams sees the beauty and love in the world and pursues it. For the parts of the world that aren't so beautiful, Adams tries his best to make them so.

His younger brother, Balee, said Adams' love and optimism has encouraged him throughout his life.

“I couldn’t have grown up with a better brother,” Balee said. “He’s there to pick you up and lift you up. You can find beauty within anything as long as you look, and that’s exactly what (Jonathan) does.”

Over time, Adams learned to express his love through art. One of his first pieces was for a grieving mother.

“My mom works in neonatal intensive care. A baby passed away, and I made art for the family and got a thank-you note,” he said. “I realized how art could touch people and had power. Not only that, but art, even though it was playing around, was an escape for me.”

Adams realized how much he needed that escape as the years passed.

Growing up in Yazoo, a few miles outside of Jackson, Adams knew he wasn’t like other boys. He remembered classmates in elementary school who would call him “girly” or “sissy.”

“I knew growing up that I was attracted to guys. I thought that would diminish, I thought everyone had those feelings, and you just eventually became heterosexual,” he said. “I needed to escape from always thinking about being gay and no one understanding.”

As Adams struggled with his sexuality, religion became an increasingly fundamental part of who he was, and intertwined with that was his own assumed sin.

“God became a big part of my life starting in early junior high, and so did noticing my family wasn’t perfect and I wasn’t perfect,” he said. “I thought that even thinking things

were sin. It started all of this. It wasn't self-hate, because I knew to see myself as someone loved because God loved me, but there was this part of me that I closed off. I always felt unknown."

In high school, Adams helped design the yearbook, sang and played basketball. Art remained in his peripheral vision. It was something he was embarrassed to fully embrace, but when he came to college and took Introduction to Art as an elective, his professor encouraged him to fully pursue art.

As a student, Adams was the kind of person in class who would stay hours afterward. If an assignment deadline was looming, he would be there working past midnight. In his first painting class on campus, the instructor noticed this work ethic and raw talent and pushed Adams to become a painter.

"I noticed that it could heal, but I didn't really start finding that in myself until college," he said.

Adams first labeled himself as a gay person while here at Ole Miss. Even though he was beginning to accept his sexuality, he continued to think of himself as a gay person who would never be in a relationship because it seemed impossible.

"The churches I had been to, that was their stance," he said.

Adams also became very involved in YoungLife, a student-run Christian organization on campus, while in college. He was a leader in the group, but sophomore year, after he told the area director that he was gay, Adams was told to step down as a leader.

“I’ve forgiven him now, but the whole year after that, I was very depressed. If I ever thought I was going to kill myself, it was during that semester,” he said. “All of my friends were in that community. Not all of them agreed with that decision, but to be excommunicated, in a way, was really difficult.”

Adams knew art had power to heal people, but it was during sophomore year that he experienced that healing firsthand. He spent the following summer in New York taking painting classes, and while in the city, he began going to the Catholic church near his dorm.

“I would see a gay couple there. I emailed Sarah Moses, who taught me religion, and asked, ‘Gay people go to church together?’” he said. “That started a journey as seeing myself as someone accepted and loved by God, not someone who had to continue suffering.”

After praying daily for God to take away his sinful thoughts, it was difficult for Adams to rethink his negative view of the gay part of his persona, and it is still something he is learning to do.

“It wasn’t a revelation. I didn’t just think, ‘I’m a happy, gay Christian now.’ I wish it was that easy, being touched by God and having no more struggles,” he said. “I am still learning to love all of me. It’s a journey.

And so is his art. In the beginning, his pieces started out as abstract shapes and initials — things Adams described as “not anything serious.” However, after his struggles

sophomore year and coming out to more people afterward, his art became an immediate release for his complicated emotions.

“I look back at that art, and it’s kind of dark. I can look at my color palette and the things I painted and the words I chose to include, and I can see what I was going through,” he said. “I can look through everything I’ve made and see where I’ve been in those moments.”

Adams’ art made a significant shift the moment he met his boyfriend, Blake Summers.

Claire Whitehurst, one of Adams’ peers who encouraged him to pursue art, said, “I remember when he met Blake. A spark was kind of in his eyes. I remember he came up to me and was kind of a little timid and said, ‘I met a boy.’ There was a sense of ease and calm about him that I had never noticed before. That was when his work really started changing and growing and got more expressive.”

As Adams has grown more confident in who he is, his art has become his voice.

“I’m not a great public speaker, that’s not my gift. My gift is storytelling through an image,” he said.

Adams created an installation for a sculpture class exploring the relationship between his religion and his sexuality, a theme he later explored in his thesis show. For this installation, Adams hung his paintings in a blacked-out room around a centerpiece made of a Bible and letters from friends who disagreed with his sexuality.

“There was audio of me singing and playing the piano to God, and I added layers of preachers’ anti-gay sermons,” he said. “People were coming from different parts of campus to see my little undergraduate art installation. It was the first time I saw people relate to my art. They had to think beyond something. When they walked in, they were challenged. I like for my art to do that.”

The conflict between his sexuality and religion is partially why Adams decided to stay in Mississippi to continue his art career. He said if there is any place where his art can challenge people while also making sense, it is certainly in a place like Mississippi.

“It’s a little messed up and needs a little work, but it’s home,” Adams said. “It would be easier to move, but we’re in such an important time in history as far as civil rights. I think it’s important to stay. We’re not all called to be someone trying to make things better, but I feel like I want to do my best.”

Adams has a studio in Water Valley, and on his 20-mile commutes there from Oxford, the beauty of the world around him often strikes him. He stops sometimes in the middle of the drive to capture the landscape, which has been inspiring him recently.

“With the election and shootings and everything really, when I get in the car and leave my phone and drive out there, it’s a freedom that I feel is like a prayer to me,” he said. “I’ve just pulled over and painted some paintings on the side of the road. Maybe it’s that when I see those fields, I see the freedom of being a kid and running across the road to the field.”

The most important thing to Adams, both as an artist and a human being, is being present and being honest to himself and to others.

“That’s what I’ve tried to do with my art, allow people a peek in. I want to be honest and truthful about my experience as a gay person, and I hope when I create art, people see that it’s about that,” he said. “Interacting with people and letting them know that you’re gay and that you’re OK with it, even if they’re not OK with it — I’m sure that will affect people over the long term.”

Though Adams is still figuring out how to love himself for who he is, the love he has for his community, his God, his family and his boyfriend is unconditional and unapologetically expressed through his art and his humanity.

“I never thought it was possible to love God and love Blake at the same time, but here I am.”

## VIII. Column: You're not alone: LGBTQ students face dual stigma regarding sexual orientation, gender identity, mental health

*This story was published in the April 12, 2018, issue of The Daily Mississippian. When discussing the LGBTQ+ community, mental health is an important part of that conversation. Queer youth are especially at risk.*

I didn't want to admit it for a long time.

In fact, it wasn't until I saw her that I was sure I was bisexual. I was even surer in the months following, as our relationship blossomed, and I fell in love for the first time.

We happened easily, napping in hammocks, cooking dinners together and going on drives with all of the windows down on warm afternoons.

Though falling in love with her was easy, coming to terms with what I thought was our reality was hard. As my love for her grew, I began to love myself less.

According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, LGBTQ individuals are almost three times more likely than others to experience a mental health condition such as major depression or generalized anxiety disorder as a result of anxieties associated with being members of the LGBTQ community, including but not limited to coming out, being

bullied or ostracized and facing daily discrimination. Individuals who identify as bisexual or questioning or fear revealing their sexual orientation or gender identity have particularly high rates of mental health issues.

Almost every time I thought about coming out publicly, my chest would constrict, my heart would start racing and my palms would sweat. The thought of losing my friends and facing public humiliation sent me into panic attacks, and the aftermath of these left me crying in bed for the rest of the day, unable to concentrate on anything else.

I wondered what my mother would think if I brought my girlfriend home and how we would never be able to spend time together outside of the confines of our houses. Our relationship, our sexuality, our homes began to feel like a prison, and we were both trapped, relegated to the punishment of constant self-hatred.

Family support plays a significant role in affecting the likelihood of suicide. People who faced rejection after coming out to their families are more than eight times more likely to have attempted suicide than people who were accepted by their families after revealing their sexual orientation.

Members of the LGBTQ community are at a higher risk for suicide because they often lack peer support and face harassment, mental health conditions and substance abuse. The NAMI also reports that the LGBTQ community reports higher rates of drug, alcohol and tobacco use than straight people. In fact, for LGBTQ people between the ages of 10 and 24, suicide is one of the leading causes of death.

Members of this community face not only the general stigma regarding mental health but also a sort of dual or double stigma because of their sexual orientation or gender identity, and this can be especially harmful. When combined with the climate of a college campus and the general stress associated with adjusting to college, the statistics get particularly frightening.

According to a survey conducted in 2015 by the Association of American Universities, 3 in 4 LGBTQ college students report experiencing sexual harassment, and most college presidents are under the impression that sexual assault and harassment are not issues on their own campuses, according to an article from The Atlantic. This is especially problematic because it shows that this problem, along with other forms of harassment and discrimination, is not going away.

In October 2017, students on Cleveland State University's campus in Ohio found flyers encouraging LGBTQ students to commit suicide. The flyers illustrated a person hanging from a noose and included statistics on LGBTQ suicide rates.

UM Pride Network President Regan Willis, who identifies as male, believes that acceptance is needed at Ole Miss to help foster a more inclusive environment and help improve the mental health conditions of LGBTQ students on campus.

"I get stared at going to class every day. Some people tell me I don't belong in the bathroom, or people will stand on the bus before they sit in the open seat next to me," he said. "I know I'm not the only LGBTQ person to experience feeling like an outsider. Education is needed to show people that LGBTQ members are just normal students

trying to make it through finals, too."

Though the University of Mississippi offers many programs and organizations that encourage inclusivity, such as the Center for Inclusion and Cross Cultural Engagement's annual Pride Camp, the UM Gay-Straight Alliance and UM Pride Network, more efforts need to be taken to make LGBTQ students feel welcome on campus and in Oxford.

While at Ole Miss, I began skipping class, slacking on homework and staying in bed for days at a time. My fear of coming out, combined with adjusting to college, kept me in a state of constant anxiety and depression. This state of mind has continued for months past our relationship's conclusion and has resulted in a number of self-harming and risky behaviors on my end because I was ashamed and afraid of not being accepted.

"As a community, LGBTQ individuals do not often talk about mental health and may lack awareness about mental health conditions. This sometimes prevents people from seeking the treatment and support that they need to get better," according to NAMI.

Though you may feel hesitant to access care because you fear being discriminated against, it is important to seek help. Early intervention, support and treatment are vital to recovery from mental health conditions, and there are many resources in place that are specifically equipped to help LGBTQ people deal with these conditions.

Recovery is not a painless process – it takes time and effort, and it hurts. However, it is important to remember that you are not alone. It took me a long time to realize that being a member of the LGBTQ community isn't something to be ashamed of – it just means

you have more love in your heart for others. Take the time to share some of that love with yourself.

**Conclusion:**

In an often-hostile environment, the Mississippi queer community has continued to thrive. Relegated to a sometimes-narrow definition, LGBTQ+ Mississippians have withstood a history of forced invisibility and invalidated the perception that they exist within the confines of their sexuality.

Queer Mississippians are artists, writers, Republicans, business owners, professors, dancers, and photographers, but most of all, they are leaders. According to Dr. Jaime Harker, modern culture suggests "there has been a kind of investment in a certain kind of Southern-ness that is very exclusionary" which is "very wrong." She described queer culture in this part of the country as resilient, but often cloaked. That is changing with a new generation of queer youth who are not only from Mississippi, but also plan to stay in Mississippi.

The intentional gap between public and private life is closing as queer youth embrace their identities and create communities within the state that embrace them. By claiming public spaces as openly queer people, they are producing the kind of prominence that necessary for the community to move forward, and they are using the state of Mississippi to do so.

Mississippians who are committed to fighting for continued change out of devotion for their state and the LGBTQ+ community are integral to the movement to allow queer Southerners a home in Mississippi. Some are creating these opportunities through their art, while others are creating these opportunities through their advocacy, but all are sharing their voice and banding together to generate change.

Years of the gay community's existence in Mississippi have set the stage for a slow crumble in the exclusivity of Southern society. The raw courage and heart of a young generation of queer Mississippians have demonstrated a clear tie between their state and their sexuality — they are not so parallel any longer, and that popular notion has been disproved. "Deviants" no more, members of the LGBTQ+ community are now visible members of society in the South, garnering a newfound legitimacy for their movement. By demanding spaces in society and rural towns across the state, young queer Mississippians are embedded in the very culture that was once believed to be repressive. Though these individuals were hidden in history, they were there — however, there existence has been amplified with the unified, perseverant voice of the present.

Continuing the work of their predecessors, young Mississippians live across the street from you, sit next to you on the church pew, work alongside you, and create the art you hang in your homes — all while painting the state technicolor with their resiliency and love.

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