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CLARK COUNTY, NEVADA

*by M. Linda Lee*

# THE ART OF HEALING

On October 1, 2017, a lone gunman opened fire on the outdoor Route 91 Harvest Festival concert from the 32nd floor of the Mandalay Bay Resort & Casino on the Las Vegas Strip, killing 58 people and wounding some 500 others. When the news broke, shock waves rolled across the country.

The shock hit **Ellen Culbertson Abramo '00** in Pennsylvania, even though she didn't know any of the victims. The fact that the art-major-turned-education graduate had recently lost her father may explain why she so strongly empathized with the victims' families. "I felt a little bit of what they were going through, but I knew that losing someone through a tragedy like that would be even worse," she says.



Ellen Culbertson Abramo (left) and her cousin, Kortney Struempf, attended the exhibit in October of 2018 in Clark County, Nevada.

Abramo's father, John Culbertson, grew up in Greenville and had devoted his life to counseling people, including traveling to New Orleans to counsel Hurricane Katrina victims in 2005. With her father as a role model, Abramo felt compelled to help the families of the Las Vegas victims. "I wanted to do something in memory of my father, to honor him, and to help these families," says the mother of six. (She met her husband, **Don Abramo '00**, during her first week at Furman.)

As it happens, Abramo and her cousin, Kortney Struempf, an art major and real estate agent who lives in Marietta, Georgia, had participated in the 49 Portraits Project after the mass shooting at a nightclub in Orlando, Florida, in 2016. Both women submitted their artwork through an application page on Facebook and were chosen to do portraits of two of the victims.

"When I found out about the Las Vegas shooting on the news, I thought maybe the lady who ran the Orlando project would do another one, but she was not able to," Abramo



Artists from several countries submitted portraits to the Las Vegas Portrait Project, which resulted in an exhibit to honor the shooting victims.

## “I WANTED TO DO SOMETHING IN MEMORY OF MY FATHER, TO HONOR HIM, AND TO HELP THESE FAMILIES.”

recalls. “So I called my cousin and said, ‘Would you help me lead this project for the Las Vegas victims?’ And, of course, Kortney agreed.”

The cousins set up a Facebook page for the Las Vegas Portrait Project in early October that called for artists to submit their work. Abramo alerted her local news station, which sent a reporter to interview her and help get the word out locally.

The women then doubled down on their efforts, widening their search to portrait artists’ groups on Facebook. “That’s how we went international,” Abramo reports. “We ended up with five artists from Canada, two from Australia, one from Greece and one from Peru.” One artist, Amanda Roth, was a survivor of the shooting whose work on a portrait helped her come to grips with her own feelings about the tragedy.

The goal of the Las Vegas Portrait Project was to recruit 58 portrait artists to create 8x10 or 24x24-inch likenesses of all the victims to present to the families. The idea was not only to pay tribute to those who lost their lives, but to help the families heal and let them know that their loved ones mattered to other people too.

Over the next four months, the organizers received some 90 entries. In choosing the artists, they aimed for a mix of media and styles, always keeping the families in mind. “Our main focus was that the artist get a good likeness,” notes Abramo. “We did have some portraits that were more stylized, and that speaks to the individuality of the artists and the people who passed.”

Participating artists were sent a packet with all the victims’ photos and background information so artists could choose their subject based on who they felt most drawn to. “It was important to us not to assign a person to the artist, so artists could have that connection to an individual and feel that inspiration,” Abramo says.

One particular connection stands out in Abramo’s mind. The artist from South Africa, Kayla Beukes, chose a young man to draw and connected with his family on Facebook. When the young man’s aunt realized the artist was from South Africa, she related that her nephew’s grandmother was also South

African. “After the artist finished her portrait and we posted it on our Facebook page, the grandmother got in touch with Kayla and told her that her last name was also on their family tree,” Abramo recounts. “It was miraculous that the artist and the young victim she drew ended up being related.”

She and Struempf also painted portraits for the project. Abramo chose Rhonda Le Rocque, who left behind a husband and child. “I was drawn to Rhonda because we were in similar stages in our lives and she seemed like the kind of friend I would like to have.”

During the process of gathering the portraits, Abramo contacted the Clark County Government Center and the Vegas Strong Resiliency Center, which was created after the tragedy to help find counseling and legal services for victims’ families and survivors. She explained the project and asked if the centers would help coordinate a memorial where all the portraits could be displayed. The two organizations agreed to help get the portraits to family members and also staged a month-long exhibit in October at the Clark County Government Center.

On October 4, 2018, the center hosted a special event for the families and artists. “I felt like a proud mom, seeing artists and families hugging and meeting for the first time in person,” Abramo remembers. “And the families were so touched and excited at the thought of bringing the portraits home. It was a very special evening.”

Motivated by a love of community service that was fostered during her years at Furman, Abramo hopes the portraits will help the families heal. “It’s been such a profound experience, and I’ve gotten to meet so many artists and family members who have connected in such a meaningful way,” says Abramo. She can bet that her father would be proud. ●

The Las Vegas Portrait Project artwork depicts the victims of a shooting in 2017 in which 58 people were killed at a concert on the Las Vegas Strip.

