

If Not for a Gun
Artist Statement by Leslie Murphy

This body of work began with grief. My Dad had a diabetic ketoacidosis incident that set off a domino effect of health problems. I watched helplessly as my Daddy wasted away and died a year later. Struggling with my intense grief, I turned to art. I was working on a memorial portrait of my Dad, drawing entirely with text. I poured my heart into this drawing, with an intense need to delve into memories that were flooding to the surface of my mind, and to write what I hadn't been able to say before my Dad passed. While working on this piece, news broke of the latest mass shooting. This time it was Sutherland Springs. It had only been a couple weeks since the Las Vegas shooting. I was immediately struck by how many people were now experiencing a flood of grief and anguish, all because of some asshole and his gun. I think that my new familiarity with loss drove me to act in some way. I thought about how helpful it was for me to turn to art to cope with loss, and I decided I wanted to share that with others. Having long been disgusted and saddened by America's gun violence epidemic, I decided to reach out to families, who, if not for a gun, would not be experiencing the relentless pain of losing a loved one.

Through a gun violence support website I was able to connect with several families all over America who wanted memorial word portraits made of their family members. The overwhelming majority of those who responded to my offer were grieving mothers. As a mom myself, I could not fathom how these women continued to live their lives. That they were not utterly broken amazed and inspired me. As I learned about the lives of their children, many of whom were in the prime of their lives, two things became abundantly clear. The first was that each of these people were so much more than the incident which ended their lives. The second was that although I had experienced a great loss I had so much to be grateful for every single day.

After the first five portraits, it occurred to me that each could be more impactful if they were more of a collaborative effort. I invited more input as to which photo to use, and how to select images ideal for portraiture and put together a questionnaire that could be shared among families and friends of each portrait subject. With each portrait, my technique improved, as did my capacity for empathy, compassion, and gratitude. I also gained a much truer sense of the demographics of gun violence. The majority of the portraits I made were of young, black and Latino men. I gained a greater sense of just how precious, unique, and special each of these lives were, and how dearly each was missed. Upon completing each portrait, each family was sent a high resolution image to print and share as much as they pleased.

In total, I made 35 memorial word portraits, each with the hope of bringing connection, collaboration, and remembrance, along with a small measure of peace and comfort to the families who participated. I wanted to make art that was a reflection of my values. I wanted to share the comfort that art can bring in times of great suffering. I wanted to make work that was truly meaningful to someone, and to do it without asking for anything in return. But most importantly, I wanted to illustrate the true cost of gun violence, and to bring humanity back to the discussion about gun violence with portraits that told the stories of lives lost. I hope that those who view these portraits will see the people behind the sad statistics, each of whom had hopes, dreams, quirks, and people who loved them unconditionally.