



GAINES BLASDEL

In his own words

“Trans people are **creative geniuses**. From **arts** and **culture** to **technology**, there is something about the transgender experience that allows us to be true **innovators**.”



In your opinion, what are some of the contributions of the trans community to society?

Trans people are creative geniuses. From arts and culture to technology, such as Wendy Carlos' work with Moog Synthesizers or Martine Rothblatt's creation of satellite radio, there is something about the transgender experience that allows us to be true innovators. I love living in New York City because of the art I am able to experience from trans and nonbinary creators who live here.

What do you believe is your gift to the world?

One thing I would like to think I am able to create is community space and fellowship in difficult circumstances. My professional work history has become focused on gender affirming surgery, first as a case manager at Callen-Lorde and now as a researcher at NYU Langone Health. While I have been on this path professionally, I've also been a patient seeking and recovering from trans surgery, and have done peer-to-peer support and education from that perspective. That has looked like moderating online and in person peer support groups for people seeking phalloplasty and metoidioplasty, as well as community conference workshops, in addition to just showing up for friends and family as they have undergone surgery.

Surgery is a personal journey that we all enter with different motivations and expectations. Even when the outcome is exactly what was expected (and what in life works that way?), just needing to have had surgery in the first place can bring a sense



of frustration and loss initially, while working towards the joyful ending we know is possible afterwards. Trying to create community and support around something that can be so individual and intense is not easy. I have personally benefited from these community spaces, and I know it is totally worth it when we can make it happen. I'm hoping that these skills I've been building in holding space for diverse experiences, space for vulnerability and solidarity about surgery, will continue to be a gift I can give to trans people in my life and to the world at large.

Can you tell us about a positive transformative moment in your life?

One of the hardest things I've ever done was quitting smoking after 10 years of about half a pack a day, starting when I was 14. While a lot of transformations are subtle and a combination of external and internal factors, that one feels more like a clear line and also like something that was totally on me. That's not to say it was overnight—it took me about four years all together! Every step of the way, even the parts that were awful at the very beginning, the little stuff such as feeling like I had left the house without my keys because I didn't have a lighter with me, reminded me of how much power I have to change my life. Just by having one less item in my pocket, I was fighting this ingrained pattern that was no longer working for me! It is a little bit paradoxical, but even when I got off track and started smoking again in that process, the fact that I had quit before for one week, for one month, and so forth helped me to know I could do it again. The transformation was that I learned I could change my life, even if that change was going to take patience and occasional failure along the way.

Where do you see yourself in 5 years? How can organizations/society support you in that pursuit?

Right now I am applying to medical school. If all goes to plan, this time in five years I will be waiting to hear back as to what residency training program I will be attending after graduation. In other words, my first job as a doctor! I've already received an incredible amount of support to get to this point. This support has come from trans physicians who have shown me it is possible to do this and have been cheerleaders of my progress, but also from cisgender allies who have helped me to see how much I am bringing to the table as I seek medical training. What society and organizations can do is recognize that people who have experience as patients can be excellent healthcare professionals, and work to set up more mentorship and support for those looking to bridge that gap and serve people going through the same thing they did. I still need all the help I can get, however, and hopefully as applications and interviews are underway, decision makers will recognize that my unusual journey to this point is an asset.

This process is also very high-cost not only in terms of application fees, but also in terms of the time spent learning how to study and what to prioritize, picking up on unwritten requirements and other aspects that take a lot of extra effort if you are "first generation" in medicine or otherwise breaking the mold of expectations for people who come from where you come from. I hope that there is more intentional support for students and early career professionals like me.

TRANS VISIBILITY

Gaines is currently a Research Associate at NYU Langone Health.