

A Superheroic Gratitude

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(Editor's Note: AU's Drawn to Diversity 2014-15 Activist-Artist Series welcomed illustrator/activist Vishavjit Singh to campus Sept. 17. Singh is a survivor of the 1984 genocidal killings of Sikhs in India. When he returned home, he sent a message of his appreciation for the AU visit.)

“Alfred University hosted me this past Wednesday for a day of art, talks and some superhero action.

“One of the most unique educational programs in the nation, Drawn to Diversity was my host courtesy Dan Napolitano.

“My passion in life is to create cartoons, write and as of last year cosplay to engage our collective contradictions, obfuscations, inspirations and carve a space for new imaginations.

“On a trip to University of Kansas this past spring sharing my art and Captain America alter-ego, I was made aware of the mission that drives the Drawn to Diversity. Armed with creativity to promote equality, reduce violence, and strengthen communities. If I was in college again this would be my most sought after class.

“I started my day addressing the Foundation class. As I do in many settings I started with an informal survey to ask everyone in the audience to pen down the first words that come to mind when they see me. My goal is to set a baseline for prevalent stereotypes of turbans and beards in contemporary America. An overwhelming majority of Americans have a negative response to a turban and beard which I sport as part of my Sikh faith.

“So to my surprise the majority of students had an utter affinity to the blue turban, blue sweater and my sparsely populated DNA spiral beard. One student wanted to run his or her fingers through my beard (* not in a creepy way).

“And then there were commonly held responses for a small minority. Muslim, Middle Eastern, Foreign, Islam. Clearly this young college crowd of fine art students came into this early morning class with a different lens than majority of Americans. For the next hour we journeyed through a collage of [Sikhtoons](#), cartoons featuring Sikhs in America and beyond.

“Then I was off to my hotel room for a change over into my Captain America alter-ego. A costume inspired by the latest Captain America: Winter Soldier movie altered extensively to fit my skinny frame supplemented by my blue turban and ankle high Supra shoes.

“My walk about through campus had its quiet moments with classes in session followed by photo moments, selfie&s

and many affirmative hollers of awesomeness. I even had a run in with Thor dressed in her thick high heeled red shoes.

“The day concluded with a Turban demystification workshop with the current crop of Drawn to Diversity students armed with their creativity and weapons of change and me armed with a colorful bag of turbans. Red, saffron, blue, turquoise, polka dot. We rolled the long cotton cloths together, willing volunteers sat on a chair and we went rolling around in circles tying turbans. My hope for these fellow citizens to step into my turban for a few moments and personalize something that is beyond the far reaches of their mental horizons.

“A student came up to me towards the end of the day and told me he really enjoyed my work with the hope I come back to Alfred. I certainly felt the warm open embrace of student community in this village known to be named after Alfred the Great.

“I would like to extend my Gratitude to the entire Alfred University for hosting me, engaging me and in the process allowing me to share my superpower in the words of a friend of mine. Making it easier for people to wrap their heads around a more compassionate world. How? By wrapping their heads with my turbanful imagination.

Vishavjit Singh is the first turbaned and bearded editorial cartoonist in United States. By day he is a software analyst and by nights/weekends he creates turbanful Sikh cartoons that can be consumed at Sikhtoons.com. He can be reached at @sikhtoons and vsingh at sikhtoons dot com.