Luke Quarto

Murfreesboro, Tenn.

Artist, musician and writer

Luke Quarto has been a self-employed writer, artist and musician for five years, but for 15 years prior, he worked in coffee shops and cafes to practice his social skills, he said. “I was diagnosed as being neurodivergent relatively late in life, and I took these types of jobs deliberately,” he told Communications Coordinator Lacey Lyons. “I have a lot of trouble connecting socially with people and interpreting social cues and body language. I always wondered why my friends seemingly had no trouble working eight-hour shifts, going out and having fun, when all I wanted to do after work was go home and recharge.” Eventually, Quarto said, he got burned out and had to change careers. His autism diagnosis five years ago “made a lot of sense,” he said, but leaving his job presented a problem: his access to health insurance through his employer was gone and he was responsible for finding new coverage. (He says he does not qualify for disability services in Tennessee.) He now works as a writer, illustrator and musician, which allows him flexibility and time to rest when he is overstimulated. He usually enrolls in the lowest-tiered plan on the Marketplace, but says his coverage is not as extensive as when he lived in California. (California expanded Medicaid in 2014.) “There are better plans available for me, but if you can’t afford the plans, they don’t do much good,” Quarto said. His parents help him pay for some of the coverage gaps he experiences, but more consistency in the programs offered from year to year and in his income would lessen the anxiety he feels around healthcare access. “It becomes a triage of your attention, and a triage of what I can afford to spend money on,” Quarto said. Because he lacked support in the workforce, Quarto said he structured his vocation around his needs. Below, he talks more extensively with Lyons about living with neurodivergence and accessing healthcare.

“Anybody who’s living beneath a certain income bracket, (money) factors into pretty much everything in life. You have to say, ‘If I have the gold plan, I can’t afford food, so I’ll have to go with the bronze plan.’ Systemic change would give people an option that is the pressure release valve they would need to prioritize buying healthcare (as an individual.) If you have a disability, it compounds it.

I try to do preventative things for myself like exercise and eat healthily. If my health starts to deteriorate, then I can go to the doctor with my limited health plan. But if you have to go to the doctor more times than your health plan covers, it is expensive. I can’t stress enough the poverty mindset. It’s a struggle to get out of, after being in it for so long. It points to a larger issue, because there are a lot of people going through this. Why are people having to not prioritize healthcare? I’m just one example of millions of people like that.

While (autism) doesn’t fully describe the whole picture, it's a very important piece. A lot of my neurodivergent friends feel frustration going to the doctor, because they feel like their symptoms are dismissed because it takes longer for the doctor to understand them. I would tell people who are neurodivergent to have compassion for themselves. When you are kind to yourself, that is healthcare.”

Quarto recently published a book, and he included handwriting samples in the final version. The link between handwriting and art has become a passion of his, because he senses a loss of human connection in all aspects of life. Since earning an English degree from Middle Tennessee State University, he has sought to reestablish that connection through his writing, art and music. He told his healthcare story for similar reasons. “Stories can bring to light what’s been in the shadows all this time,” he said.