Not being straight, not being white, I have experienced my ‘otherness’ repeatedly in my life. And I think that’s always made me more sensitive to the fears of otherness in my patients. So I thought, “You know, it might not be a bad idea to share my experience and my understanding through my lens to my colleagues about LGBT health.”

This is how Dr. Henry Ng described how he became involved in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender health advocacy following his final medical residency lecture.

Ng, pronounced “ing”, is a Michigan State University alumnus who graduated with his medical degree in 2001. This week, he came back to his alma mater to discuss LGBT health issues and to promote health equality with medical school faculty and students.

Last year, Ng was voted as President Elect of the Gay and Lesbian Medical Association.

After graduating from MSU, Ng eventually began work in Cleveland, Ohio where, after he and other health advocates recognized a need in the community, was instrumental in establishing the Pride Clinic in 2007--Ohio’s only LGBT health clinic.

From very humble beginnings, the clinic has broken down barriers when it comes to LGBT health. Based on community surveys the clinic started out with only mental health, urgent and primary care but has since expanded to include hormone therapy for transgender patients and extensive community outreach and education programs.

The Pride Clinic creates a welcome environment for patients by breaking traditional molds of medical care, right down to the first thing that happens when someone walks through the door—filling out intake forms.

From name, relationship status, sexuality and down to the pronoun they wish to be identified with, Ng said patients are able to be who they are.

“We gave them choices,” Ng said. “Not just single or married, which is what we often see—single, married, divorced, widowed. But if you have a partner or you’re in a relationship, our clinic is here to acknowledge who those people are. That’s what makes us, I think, different than most other clinics.”

By creating tools like this, Ng said the relationship between patients and staff is much more comfortable, particularly for people who are transgender.

“Those types of patients who present both masculine and feminine characteristics but they have a name card that says ‘John,’ it takes awhile for the staff to get used to saying ‘Julia.’ But we gave them a tool that says, ‘Oh, Julia is here.’ It makes things a lot smoother and makes our patients feel acknowledged and they feel welcome that way,” Ng said.

In Mid-Michigan the closest LGBT health clinic is in Ann Arbor, which is a “huge problem” said Deanna Hurbert, assistant director at the MSU LGBT Resource Center.

Ng was asked by City Pulse what he thought was the biggest health challenge facing the LGBT community.

“I still think it’s stigma and discrimination,” Ng said after a pause. “People who are afraid to come out to their physicians and their care providers are afraid they could be treated in a negative or judgemental way.”

It’s because of this that they avoid care, he said, which can lead to harmful circumstances of self-medication. He said there needs to be major cultural changes so that any type of medical discrimination is unacceptable.

The goal: “Be who you are but be healthy as you’re doing it,” he said.