I believe that I was hired to do the first portrait commission of the Internet history.

Back in the mid 90s I had my website ([www.naza.com](http://www.naza.com)) built. However, at that time, no one knew how to attract visitors to their websites or how to build an email list of prospect clients for their businesses. The most common comments that I got when I told people that I had a website were: “what is that?”, I do not have a computer”, and “I do not have access to the Internet yet”. Later, those comments were substituted by “my son is the one who uses the computer”…

I decided to dig for any kind of tool that could help me spread the word about my website. That was when I found the Yahoo Chat. I used to go from chat room to chat room cutting and pasting the same sentence: “You are invited to visit my art exhibition”. Some people followed me to the next room and started a conversation. They invariably went to my website. Depending on their comments, I would add them or not as my friends and made notes to myself to mark the potential buyers.

I made a lot of personal friends and collectors using that approach. One of them was Tim Hulings, from West Virginia. He hired me to paint his 90 year old mother’s garden. At first, I was a little scared and suspicious. However, I decided to take the risk and fly to Washington, D.C., rent a car, and drive across mountains and through the Shenandoah Valley, to the very end of the road past a little town in West Virginia. The last road ended exactly in Mrs. Hulings front yard.

It was a beautiful sunny spring day. Next door, I saw another house with a very large front yard where many horses were eating. I recognized the red barn that Tim had talked about in the chat room. The silence was almost complete. Suddenly, I felt really scared. What if this was a trap, set up by some weirdo to get me in the middle of no were alone with him? The only safety precaution that I had taken was to give the directions of my whereabouts to my ex-husband, who lived in Arlington, VA. Having a cell phone made me feel safer.

I knocked at the door, but no one came. I yelled a few times, but got no answer. I had come too long a way to turn back without doing my job. Since there was no fence, I walked around the house to the garden. I remembered Tim telling me in the weeks that preceded my trip that he kept talking to his mother’s flowers asking them to stay beautiful and wait for me to get there before they died. Among such a variety of flowers, the life span of some of them was probably very short.

Then, I saw her. Mrs. Hulings was kneeling at a flower bed, next to a very old sheep and an even older dog. I introduced myself and told my reason to be there. She smiled and welcomed me. I asked her if I could take some shots of her while she was working with the flowers, and she agreed.

About thirty minutes later, Tim arrived. It was so cool to meet a chat friend for the first time!!! After a little talk (he was probably at his lunch break), I asked him if I could paint his mother and in the garden, instead of only the garden. The answer was yes. After a few minutes talking, I started my trip back to D.C. area, then, flew to Florida, where I did the painting, having as reference the photos that I took. According to a reporter who interviewed me later for the Sun Sentinel, the Hulings family told her that the painting had been the focus of a birthday party for my subject.

I lost contact with Tim after he changed his email. Those Yahoo chat days are long gone, but some of those virtual friends that I made in 1995, 96, and 97 became my friends for life. Some became my collectors too. I am very thankful to them for supporting my career and for being my business and Internet advisors for so long.