

# TRANSFORMING SOUTH DAKOTA



A COLLECTION OF PHOTOS, STORIES, AND SO MUCH MORE

October 2019

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THANK YOU to every person that has supported this project. It goes without saying that this would not have been possible without the courageous people that are featured within these pages. Thank you to Susan for being the mediator between us and the participants and encouraging us when we doubted ourselves. Thank you to our family for putting up with us being gone for hours multiple times a week to make this happen. Thank you to those of you who contributed financially to these endeavors. Thank you to everyone who took a chance with us and this project. We appreciate you.

# Hello!

This magazine was a true labor of love, mixed with tears and laughter. We set out on this journey with a simple goal: to change the world. We're not there yet, but what we have accomplished is an amazing cultivation of stories from true South Dakotans. We wanted to give trans and non-binary youth and young adults a face and a voice in this state that can be quick to ignore them.

As you can imagine, embarking on this journey caused us to question ourselves many times. Are we putting these kids and young adults in danger? Are we re-traumatizing them by asking them, at times, sensitive questions? Are we doing this right? We came to this conclusion: we had no idea what we were doing. We took every precaution we could throughout this whole process to ensure the answer to those first two questions were "no." Every participant in this magazine has seen their photos and story and have given us their blessing to print them.

They are taking a chance on this, hoping it helps just a little. Every story you read in the following pages will make you sad, but you will find within the words stories of courage and hope. These kids and young adults are badass people who will make this state a better place for everyone.

We hope you learn something new and are able to find your own voice to advocate for something you believe in.

Cheers,  
Michaela & Danielle





# DEFINITIONS

**Ally:** Someone who advocates and supports a community other than their own. Allies are not part of the communities they help. A person should not self-identify as an ally but show that they are one through action.

**Bigender:** Refers to those who identify as two genders. Can also identify as multigender (identifying as two or more genders). Do not confuse this term with Two-Spirit, which is specifically associated with Native American and First Nations cultures.

**Binary:** Used as an adjective to describe the genders female/male or woman/man. Since the binary genders are the only ones recognized by general society as being legitimate, they enjoy

**Cisgender:** A term for people whose gender is the same as the sex they were assigned at birth.

**Drag:** Exaggerated, theatrical, and/or performative gender presentation. Although most commonly used to refer to cross-dressing performers (drag queens and drag kings), anyone of any gender can do any form of drag. Doing drag does not necessarily have anything to do with one's sex assigned at birth, gender identity, or sexual orientation.

**Gender:** A set of cultural constructs describing characteristics that may historically be related to femininity, masculinity, women, men, nonbinary people, or social norms.

**The Gender Binary:** A system of viewing gender as consisting solely of two, opposite categories, termed "male and female", in which no other possibilities for gender or anatomy are believed to exist. This system is oppressive to anyone who defies their sex assigned at birth, but particularly those who are gender-variant or do not fit neatly into one of the two standard categories.

**Gender Dysphoria:** Anxiety and/or stress that can be present due to a mismatch between sex assigned at birth and gender identity. Not all trans people experience gender dysphoria.

**Gender Expression/Presentation:** The physical manifestation of one's gender identity through clothing, hairstyle, voice, body shape, etc. (typically referred to as masculine or feminine). Many transgender people seek to make their gender expression (how they look) match their gender identity (who they are), rather than their sex assigned at birth. Someone with a gender nonconforming gender expression may or may not be transgender.

**Gender Identity:** One's internal sense of being male, female, neither of these, both, or other gender(s). Everyone has a gender identity, including you. For transgender people, their sex assigned at birth and their gender identity are not necessarily the same.

**Genderqueer:** An identity commonly used by people who do not identify or express their gender in a binary. Those who identify as genderqueer may see themselves outside of or in-between the binary. Not everyone who identifies as genderqueer identifies as trans or non-binary.

**Heteronormative/Heteronormativity:** These terms refer to the assumption that heterosexuality is the norm, which plays out in interpersonal interactions and society and furthers the marginalization of queer people.

**Intersex:** A person with a less common combination of hormones, chromosomes, and/or anatomy that are used to assign sex at birth.

**Nonbinary (Also Non-Binary):** Preferred umbrella term for all genders other than female/male or woman/man, used as an adjective



**Passing:** Being perceived by others as a particular identity/gender or cisgender regardless how the individual in question identifies.

**Queer:** General term for gender and sexual minorities who are not cisgender and/or heterosexual. There is a lot of overlap between queer and trans identities, but not all queer people are trans and not all trans people are queer. The word queer is still sometimes used as a hateful slur, so although it has mostly been reclaimed, be careful with its use.

**Sex:** A set of characteristics associated with reproduction and biology that generally assign individuals into categories of “male” and “female.”

**Sex Assigned At Birth:** The assignment and classification of people as male, female, intersex, or another sex assigned at birth often based on physical anatomy at birth and/or karyotyping.

**Sexual Orientation:** A person’s physical, romantic, emotional, aesthetic, and/or other form of attraction to others. In Western cultures, gender identity and sexual orientation are not the same. Trans people can be straight, bisexual, lesbian, gay, asexual, pansexual, queer, etc. just like anyone else. For example, a trans woman who is exclusively attracted to other women would often identify as lesbian.

**Stealth:** To not be openly transgender in all or almost all social situations.

**Transgender/Trans:** An umbrella term for people whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. The term transgender is not indicative of gender expression, sexual orientation, hormonal makeup, physical anatomy, or how one is perceived in daily life. \*Note that transgender does not have an “ed” at the end.

**Transition:** A person’s process of developing and assuming a gender expression to match their gender identity. Transition can include: coming out to one’s family, friends, and/or co-workers; changing one’s name and/or sex on legal documents; hormone therapy; and possibly (though not always) some form of surgery. It’s best not to assume how one transitions as it is different for everyone.

**Transphobia:** Systemic violence against trans people, associated with attitudes such as fear, discomfort, distrust, or disdain. This word is used similarly to homophobia, xenophobia, misogyny, etc.

**Trans Man:** Trans man generally describes someone assigned female at birth who identifies as a man.

**Trans Woman:** Trans woman generally describes someone assigned male at birth who identifies as a woman.

**Two-Spirit:** An umbrella term indexing various indigenous gender identities. Some indigenous people may use this to describe their sexual orientation. Only indigenous people may use this to describe themselves.

(Trans Student Educational Resources, 2019)

## Dead Names

Dead naming is the act of using a transgender person's birth name (or dead name) rather than their current chosen name, either to their face or without them present. This includes accidentally using the dead name, using the dead name to talk about the transgender person's past, and purposefully using the transgender person's dead name. The *only time* it is acceptable for someone to mention a transgender person's dead name is with the explicit and continuous approval from the transgender person. While it may not seem harmful, using a transgender person's dead name can cause extreme dysphoria and pain for the transgender person, and possibly put them in danger by outing them. This also applies to non-binary and other genderqueer people who use a name other than the one given at birth.

**Sex**, **gender identity**, and **gender expression** exist on a spectrum or continuum. Many of us were taught to think about these in binaries. Before we are even born, society tells those around us what color clothes or what kind of toys to get us based on what our sex is. People can live anywhere within these spectrums, leading to a world filled with people made up of different combinations of identities.

### SEX SPECTRUM

Female ————— Intersex ————— Male

### GENDER IDENTITY SPECTRUM

Woman ————— Genderqueer ————— Man

### GENDER EXPRESSION SPECTRUM

Feminine ————— Androgynous ————— Masculine

## In Memory of Terri Bruce 1963-2018



Terri Bruce was a passionate, determined, big-hearted champion for transgender South Dakotans. For Terri, advocacy was not just a hobby or a mere interest. It was a calling. In the last years of his life he frequently spoke of his belief that he had found his purpose in advocating on behalf of transgender people across our state. Born in Flandreau and raised in Sioux Falls, Terri was a proud transgender man who fiercely stood up for his community. Through sheer force of will Terri brought change not just to South Dakota, but to this country – and we are all better for it.

Terri was instrumental in the defeat of South Dakota's HB 1008, a 2016 bill that targeted transgender kids and would have been the first codified piece of anti-transgender legislation in the country had it become law. Everyone who advocated alongside Terri knew that he would get in the car and drive across the state in the middle of winter to have hard conversations with lawmakers about what that harmful legislation would do. He willingly shared his truth in public testimony and private conversations so that a damaging law could be stopped. He did so even though he wasn't a student and even though he would not have faced the brunt of the law's violence. He did so because he knew that any attack on a transgender person in our state was an attack on every transgender South Dakotan.

The fight for transgender equality and justice is far from over. Though we can't know what Terri would think of this project, we believe he would be proud. We believe he would also see it is a missed opportunity if we didn't urge every reader of this magazine to do whatever they can to build upon the foundation he created and to declare loudly and proudly that the lives of transgender South Dakotans matter and that none of us will accept injustice any longer – not in our state, and not in this world. The burden of discrimination that Terri had to live with ultimately is what killed him. He died by suicide in December 2018.

The brave and vulnerable space Terri created has allowed transgender youth and young adults to claim the power they hold and tell their own stories within these pages and across South Dakota. Alongside their families, friends, and loved ones, these youth and young adults are continuing Terri's legacy of bravery and love.





## Cameron

Age: 11 | Pronouns: she/her/hers | Town: Sioux Falls, SD

Assigned as male at birth, 11-year-old Cameron (Cam) is a transgender youth in our area. As a 4-year-old, Cam had asked her mother why God gave her a boy body when she had a girl heart. Over the course of the next several years, her family would learn more about strength and courage than most in our community.

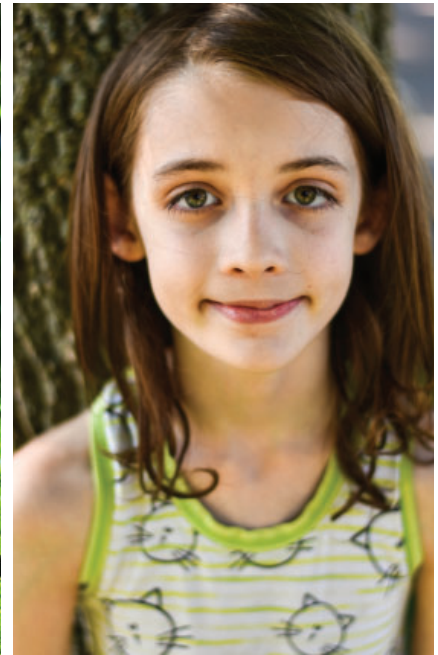
At age 4, when the rest of her preschool class would answer whether they were a boy or a girl by moving to one side of the room or the other, a motionless Cam stood quietly, unsure of how to answer. Because she was non-verbal and young, it was dismissed as stubbornness or misunderstanding.

It wasn't until age 5 that Cam's parents began to awaken to who she was. As Cam's mom was sewing some clothing, Cam requested a change in style; instead of the usual pants and shirt, she asked for a dress. Mom obliged and made an A-line for Cam. That dress would go unworn for many months. It wasn't until several months later she learned Cam preferred a dress that she could twirl in. After crafting the perfect dress, Cam's

mom proudly beams that it's one of her favorite dresses to wear. The awareness also began to set in that the difficulty in choosing "boy or girl" in preschool, and a hundred other situations, was less about a behavior and more about her just not knowing where to go.

The transition to having a daughter was easier for Cam's mom at first. However, not too long after being given the statistics on suicides among transgender youth, her dad understood the gravity of recognizing and embracing who Cam truly was. "She's been a girl since the day she was born. We just didn't know it because she couldn't tell us," says Cam's mom. "She's not confused. It's not a phase. She's a girl." While she is a typical preteen girl in many ways, including her fear of fitting in, her love of kittens, cheese pizza, and dreams of fame, she is on a journey that not many 7-year-olds will ever experience and even less would survive.

Cam became homeschooled due to ridicule and verbal attacks from her peers when others weren't watching. Neighborhood friends were siphoned off



by their caregivers. World leaders expressed disdain for those that didn't identify as the gender they were assigned at birth. The immeasurable weight of an unaccepting world was too much for this 7-year-old, and, defeated, Cam began to withdraw and unravel. She began acting more masculine and no longer wanted to wear her dresses. By the 4th grade, Cam would battle depression, suicidal thoughts, and an overwhelming sense of fear. She had given up the pronoun that meant so much to her. For six breathless months, the family lived in fear of losing Cam.

Luckily, Cam has reclaimed her life and finds happiness in using the pronouns of her heart: she/her/hers. In the last year, Cam has come to believe that normal isn't something to strive for; she understands that none of us are "normal", but instead we're each a uniquely colored thread in the fabric of our shared story. When asked what she wants people to know, she wisely quips, "I'm not normal like everyone else. Everyone isn't normal but they are perfect just the way they are."

Even though there have been conversations about moving to another state that is more accepting, supportive, and understanding of transgender rights and realities, Cam's parents courageously stay to encourage acceptance, belonging, and happiness for their daughter. And they also believe in the ability of elected officials, education staff, and community members to use preferred pronouns as a first, and most paramount, step. "They need to understand how important pronouns are and that they really, really matter to that person." Cam's brother is also courageous. He steps up during our interview to proclaim, "She's my sister. And if anybody doesn't accept that they can get right out of my house."

Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu once said, "Being deeply loved by someone gives you strength, while loving someone deeply gives you courage." A child's strength. A family's courage. And the unquestionable importance in a pronoun.



## Eve

Age: 22 | Pronouns: she/her/hers | Town: Vermillion, SD

Have you ever met someone that you would divulge your deepest secrets to because of how easy they are to talk to? No? Then you need to meet Eve. Eve is soft-spoken and gentle, taking care to let everyone she meets know that she sees and accepts them. Eve has lived in South Dakota her entire life, spending much of it in the southeastern part of the state. Lately, she spends her days at a local coffee shop pulling espresso shots, steaming milk, and catering to those who frequent the small-town coffee shop where she works.

Eve first heard the word “transgender” at the age of 14. It wasn’t until January 2018, when Eve was 19, that she felt most comfortable identifying as a transgender woman. Once Eve came to this realization, she relied on her partner and two close friends for support. She started to distance herself from her family, due in part to fear— fear of not being accepted and fear of having to hide herself and her identity.

Once Eve began to transition, she found herself faced with many obstacles. This included not knowing where to find resources, dealing with the difficulties of health insurance, and balancing her personal needs with the financial burden that came with the process of transitioning.

General feelings of safety, something usually taken for granted, are always at the forefront of Eve’s mind. This is especially true while traveling across the state and being in unfamiliar places. Eve has had things yelled at her from vehicles passing and has had confrontations in public bathrooms. Instances such as these have taught Eve to always be aware of her surroundings to ensure she is in a safe space.

Eve identified that a major obstacle up front was not knowing where to turn for resources. “It’s not something they give you a handbook for,” Eve jokes. Prior to receiving this information, Eve felt lost not knowing where to access the appropriate





healthcare. She used the Internet to search for resources, eventually turning to her primary care provider who was able to provide Eve with more options for support.

Eve took on these challenges in stride. Being transgender is an immutable part of who Eve is, but it is just one part of her. She is a multifaceted person – a daughter, a friend, a partner, a barista, a poet, and an artist among many other things. Eve enjoys music, reading, and writing her own poetry. She has reconnected with her family and has hung onto this statement from her stepfather: “I know you wouldn’t be doing this if it wasn’t who you really are because it’s just so hard. It’s such a hard thing to put yourself through.”

Although Eve doesn’t know if she will remain in South Dakota her entire life, it is not outside the realm of possibility to move to a bigger, more accepting state. The continued anti-trans legislation that has popped up four years in a row in the South Dakota legislature makes it hard to feel safe in any public space. Civil Rights protections at a state level are some things that could keep Eve here - loss of employment and loss of housing are petrifying notions that individuals in the trans community unfortunately have to face. Wherever Eve does end up, she knows that she will always call South Dakota home.







# Oliver

Age: 18 | Pronouns: he/him/his | Town: Yankton, SD

Practicing percussion since the 5th grade, Oliver specializes in the piano, trap set, xylophone, and just about any percussion instrument you can think of. This isn't the only unique thing about Oliver. Oliver is an advocate and activist for transgender youth and adults in South Dakota as well as a trailblazer in Yankton County - he is the first person in the county to change his gender marker.

Oliver is an 18 year old transgender male from Yankton, South Dakota. First hearing the word at the age of 13, he knew at this point that this is where his identity lied. Oliver came out to his friends and family in 2014, then publicly in 2015.

He shares, "It took about a year for it to really settle in. It clicked the very first moment I heard it described. I just didn't want to acknowledge it because every time I heard it mentioned, it wasn't in a positive light." Oliver struggled with his well-being that entire year until he found the words to share his true self with the ones he loved.

Within the last year, Oliver has become an advocate and an activist for LGBTQ individuals in the State. In this short amount of time, Oliver has started a GSA (gay/straight alliance) in Yankton and helped push through a measure to add a non-gendered bathroom to Yankton High School. Although Oliver has had some tremendous accomplishments within the last year, they did not come easily.

Oliver found himself having to education school staff, counselors, medical professionals, and legal professionals along the way about what it meant to be transgender. He has also faced extensive harassment including people saying inappropriate things to him at his workplace, getting shoved around in the bathroom, having derogatory slurs thrown at him, receiving hate mail, and getting his locker vandalized. For having so many hateful things thrown his way, Oliver continues to stay positive and will continue to be an advocate and activist for the LGBTQ community.

Oliver does plan to leave South Dakota to attend the University of Minnesota the Fall 2020 semester and is unsure if he will return to South Dakota. He does think South Dakota has some work to do to become a more comfortable place to live, including making schools and public places more inclusive, having more non-gendered bathrooms, and less trans-negative legislation. Oliver isn't sure what his future holds, but it is not outside the realm of possibility that he could run for office one day. One thing he is sure of is his desire to continue to help people stating, "I just really enjoy helping people. That's why I want to go into psychology. I want to help others that are struggling the same ways that I did."





# Samson

Age: 22 | Pronouns: he/him/his | Town: Sioux Falls, SD

Born and raised in Sioux Falls, Samson is finishing up his undergraduate degree with eyes on a doctoral program in Minneapolis. Like many that we spoke to for this project, Samson is a highly motivated individual who wants to make things better for those around him. Samson identifies as a transgender man and that identity is helping to shape his path ahead. He's hoping to focus his research on transgender psychology and set new standards for psychological research. Rattling off examples of how sex and gender are reported in current psychological research, it's obvious that this researcher in the making has a bright future ahead.

When he's not thinking of ways to disrupt the norms of research, Samson spends his time reading, hanging out with friends, and woodworking. Woodworking is not something you might associate with a 22-year-old college guy, but Samson picked up the hobby in college from a professor, even making his dad a wine bottle stopper for his birthday. He has also spent time in high school and college building theater sets.

Samson likes to surround himself with people that make him happy, noting that he's had a strong, supportive group of friends since high school. It was also in high school that Samson first heard the word "transgender," putting into motion a series of events that would help him realize and accept his gender identity. When he was 19, Samson came out as trans and "hit the ground running toward transition," never looking back. He reflects on his friend group in high school, stating that he had a great queer group of friends to lean on.

Coming out looks different for every trans person and while no two stories are the same, Samson saw in his parents what others have seen after coming out. His parents needed time to adjust and become comfortable with their son, and they now fully accept and use the correct name and pronouns. Some of his family may never come around, which is unfortunately the reality for far too many trans kids.

Samson's passion for education and working toward positive change in his community is palpable as he talks about the history of the trans identity and its role in drag. The drag shows we know today don't accurately reflect the roots of drag and the trans women of color who are often left out of today's drag. He'd like to see more trans-positive drag shows during Pride month in his hometown. "Pride shouldn't be a money-maker. Pride should be a protest," says Samson.

He also has a few items on his wishlist for his elected officials, including protections for trans people from being fired and denied housing due to gender identity and making it easier for trans people to get their name changed. He'd also like to see less transphobic laws being introduced and challenges his elected officials to work on passing bills that protect him.

When asked if he had any last messages for people reading the magazine, Samson shared, "This isn't a new thing. We've existed way back in history in different cultures. People aren't jumping on bandwagon. We're going to exist whether you like it or not and we won't disappear."



# Miles

Age: 21 | Pronouns: he/him/his | Town: Sioux Falls, SD



He tells his story with reverence and emotion. When he speaks you are reminded of your favorite professor lecturing about things that set his soul on fire. He talks about school and his goal to complete his degree in neuropsychology with minors in gender and women's studies. He narrates the events of his life; laughing through the painful parts and making folly of the heaviness. It is in these moments that his voice betrays him. He is hurt and hopeful; both lion and lamb. As this young man speaks, it brings to light all of the shadowy spaces we create for transgender young people like Miles. He is teaching us something.

And the topic of today's lesson? Support.

Although Miles was assigned female at birth, he recognized at an early age that what he felt inside didn't match the body he was born into.

But it wasn't until his first semester in college that he could put a name to what he felt. Discussing gender in his sociology class, there was a question asking about gender.

The university had 'transgender' as one of the options. Unlike the earlier archetypes he had heard through his life such as "transvestite" and "transsexual" he finally recognized himself in a word and it clicked.

"I was like, 'wait, that's me; that's ME'...I put the pieces together."

While it was freeing to finally know who he was, Miles struggled with how to explain this awareness to his family and transition safely in South Dakota. "My future is going to be ruined if I decide to come out. I should do it now or never because I have to get ahead of the game," Miles says about his thoughts on changing during the introduction of anti-trans legislation. "I have to change who I am NOW so I can fit in the bathroom."

Miles smiles as he tells the story of coming out to his sister. He recalls sending a text to his sister from the dishroom of his job starting with, "hey, I gotta tell you something." In the heavy silence as he waited for her response, he thought about the rejection and pain that





might come. Instead, his sister sent him a long paragraph of affirmation and love. She changed the pronouns she used immediately and her children, Miles' nieces, call him "Uncle Miles."

Unfortunately, not all of the responses were positive.

Wanting to fully educate his parents on who he was and what lay ahead of him, Miles went to work gathering information and creating poster boards of positivity and truth. He collected and prepared studies, CT scans, results of top surgeries, MRIs, bible verses, and quotes from other accepting Christian parents of trans kids.

Again, Miles chitters his wounded laugh and explains that his father went silent at first as his mother adamantly proclaimed that it was "just a phase."

Tangible support and affirmation were even more difficult to by. Wanting to know all he could, Miles got in touch with a transgender group. He quickly

learned how ill-equipped the South Dakota health care system is to support trans patients. Because his parents had kicked him off of their insurance the day after he came out as transgender, Miles had a year of no medical treatment. Luckily, Miles heard about a Fargo-Moorehead based health system that is gender affirming and provides care based on a sliding scale.

Miles is quickly becoming the man he was meant to be. He is excited to have healthcare after his 30 day waiting period, has a loving partner, and the upward glance of his trusty canine sidekick, Hufflepuff. Like other men his age, he dreams of spreading his wings; heading west to the more accepting communities where jobs are plentiful in his industry. He wants to change the world, understand more about it, and educate those along his path.

And just beneath the surface of this incredible being, is a keen understanding of the abundances and voids of informational, emotional, instrumental, and esteem support; support that is important for all in society to perceive and receive.

Dan Pearce is a well known author and blogger of, "Single Dad Laughing" - a hilariously genuine narration of everything from parenting and society to love and human connection. And it is this line from his blog that most reminds me of Miles' story and the countless others like him who are left bearing the weight of our inactions, judgements, and beliefs.

"The next time you want to withhold your help, or your love, or your support for another for whatever the reason, ask yourself a simple question: do the reasons you want to withhold it reflect more on them or on you? And which reasons do you want defining you forevermore?"



## Sebastian

Age: 14 | Pronouns: they/them/theirs | Town: Sioux Falls, SD

Sebastian is a strong, well-spoken 14-year-old who identifies as non-binary. Sitting across from their mom, Lia during the interview, they spoke about their experiences in South Dakota as a non-binary teenager. Lia, said that Sebastian has “existed outside of the binary” since they were a toddler, and Sebastian said they had never felt comfortable being female. It wasn’t until they had more exposure to people who identified as transgender or queer that they were able to put the words to what they were feeling. At the age of 10 or 11, Sebastian’s gender identity became clear, and they relied on their mom and aunties for support in coming out.

Sebastian has been aware of their gender identity since a young age; Lia recounted them using gender neutral pronouns when provided with the option for self determined pronouns at 8 years old. Sebastian has been coming out in middle school, and while they shared stories of

personal bullying, they simultaneously expressed concern for their friends’ struggles and safety to come out. When it comes to bullies, Sebastian tends to ignore them and isn’t afraid for their self. This bold approach to bullying is supported by Sebastian drawing upon their expansive support system to summon the courage to overcome challenges. Through it all, the loving and accepting demeanor demonstrated by Sebastian’s mom is wholly reflected in Sebastian.

Sebastian chose the location of the photoshoot and interview, Cherry Rock and Riverdale Parks, because these parks were places they frequented as a child. These days, Sebastian enjoys drawing people, cosplaying, and listening to Youngblood and Panic! At the Disco in their spare time. When it comes down to it, Sebastian has a lot on their plate. But at the end of the day, they’re just a teenager, trying to live life without regard to others’ thoughts of them.

Sebastian talked a lot about school and their experiences as a non-binary student. As many discussions revolving around trans and non-binary students, bathrooms were an important topic. Sebastian's school has two unisex bathrooms, one in the nurse's office and another in the room that houses in school suspension (ISS). Both bathrooms can be a source of added stress, often leading to other students asking why someone is using those bathrooms and not the student bathrooms. Sebastian will often go to another floor of their school where other students don't know them to use the bathroom or they will refrain from using the bathroom at all during the school day, rushing home to their own bathroom. Sebastian wishes their school could provide more unisex bathrooms so that all students have the same access to bathroom facilities and that they and other trans or non-binary students can avoid uncomfortable and sometimes dangerous situations.

When asked what they would like people to know, Sebastian just wishes people understood that gender identity is not a choice. Sebastian also wishes their community and state would be more supportive. "When people don't support you, you are pushed away and you don't have anywhere to go," Sebastian explained. Without support and understanding, some of Sebastian's queer friends have found themselves in harmful, unstable situations. Sadly, some of them have even attempted suicide due to lack of support. When asked if they will stay in South Dakota, they said, "Perhaps." They would only want to leave in search of colder weather.

Sebastian has one last parting message "People deserve to be loved for who they are. If you really love someone, you will understand who they are."





# Holli

Age: 27 | Pronouns: she/her/hers | Town: Sioux Falls, SD

In 2016, a small town girl from Iowa moved to Sioux Falls to chase a career and start a new life. Sick of the small-mindedness of her hometown, Holli made a leap in the dark and started anew in Sioux Falls. Holli has known she was trans from a young age.

Without the words to describe what she was feeling inside, she hid her true self as long as she could. Despite the fear of not being accepted by her family, Holli began buying the clothes that she longed to wear. Shoved in the back of a closet in her childhood home, she buried her secret.

Inevitably, her mother discovered her secret and quickly validated Holli's fear of being misunderstood and isolated. An argument ensued with her mom and a downward spiral for Holli began. Moving through life on auto-pilot, Holli did what she had to do to get by; thankfully, when she was in her early 20s, things started to click.

Thanks to the internet and some top-notch research, Holli found herself reflected within web pages and online resources. She was trans. Prior to this exploration, Holli had never known about transgender people and certainly had never been around anyone who identified as trans.

It was one simple decision in 2018 that changed the trajectory of Holli's life forever. A boost of confidence and a glimmer of vulnerability allowed Holli a chance at acceptance and support that she never fathomed possible.

Holli, a charismatic, friendly fan of Marilyn Manson and video games, took a chance on a drag show after the annual Sioux Falls Pride event and never looked back. After that night, she found herself getting more involved as an advocate for

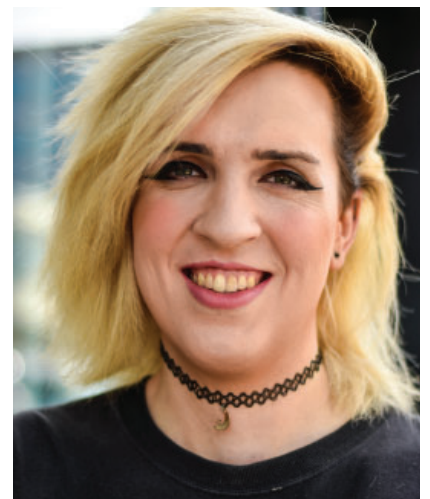
the trans community, earning a spot to help plan Sioux Falls Pride and was able to witness the First Annual Pride Parade from planning to execution.

Reflecting back on this, Holli says, "I met so many cool people and my social life has sky-rocketed from that one decision I made when I was feeling good about myself."

Glowing, Holli talks about her online gaming community for trans girls. A community that quickly turned into a strong support system of close friends. Holli has also found comfort in downtown Sioux Falls, knowing she is safe at her local hangs. Club David and Lucky's have given Holli confidence to spend time in a safe place, making new friends. It was these experiences that led Holli to choose the downtown area as the location for her photoshoot and interview.

Holli hasn't always been as comfortable as she is now going out in public places in Sioux Falls; fears of unfamiliar bathroom situations and confrontational community members gave Holli a reason to avoid new situations.

Holli, honest and open, discussed her unsupportive family, mental health, and negative coping habits. Her story is like many other trans women, unfortunately. Despite the hostility she's faced from those who were supposed to love her, Holli continued her higher education and has dreams of moving to the West Coast to work for a bigger technology company. For now, though, she's now an active member of the Sioux Falls community; you might find her hanging out at Vishnu Bunny getting a new tattoo or enjoying a drink on the patio of Club David. No matter the place, if you run into her downtown, be prepared to be greeted with a smile and a new friend.







## Bryan

Age: 18 | Pronouns: he/him/his | Town: Sioux Falls, SD

His name is Bryan.

In many ways, he's like any other South Dakota 18-year-old; eyes set on opportunity and full of hope for the future. But Bryan's journey has been anything but average. People he's never met worry about what bathroom he uses. They ask intrusive questions about the sexual organs he was born with. They refuse to use his preferred name or pronoun. They insist that he is wrong about who he is, who he loves, and what he feels and believes. Time after time, he's been denied the autonomy given to others his age, all because people feel entitled to strip him of the basic care he requires.

His worries are not those of an average man his age. Neither are his perseverance and strength.

Born in Sioux Falls and assigned female at birth, Bryan was raised as a girl in a Mormon family. After his mother and father split when he was young, he spent years living with his mom. Bryan and his family attended a Mormon church where he—still living as a

female—heard the bishop preach against the LGBT community and declare that sexuality of any kind was against God.

As he grew, family and therapists kept telling him he was “just a tomboy,” but Bryan sensed there was something in his soul that didn't match with the physical body with which he was born. He lived in Iowa and attended a high school that didn't have a gay-straight alliance. The denials from those around him made him feel unworthy. He started to self-harm. No one was really out in his community, so he would search the internet in an attempt to gain insight into his feelings of unrest.

“My mom found out that I had looked up the word ‘transgender’ on Google, so that led to another interesting conversation,” said Bryan, laughing. “I ended up kind of piecing it together.”

At 14, Bryan finally acknowledged his truth—he was a transgender male. Thankfully, a friend and fellow highschooler was already



transitioning. The kindred spirit offered advice on how Bryan could best come out to his mother. Bryan made his decision. He would reveal his authentic self to his family.

Having already come out to his mother as bisexual, Bryan knew that it would be important to have all of his thoughts prepared. He feverishly put his words and research onto note cards. He and his mother had their best conversations in the family van. On a cool April evening, he sat with her in the vehicle and told his mother that he was transgender.

“She just looked at me and said ‘No, you’re not!’ and shut it down so quick,” said Bryan. “I was like ‘Okay, now where do I go with this?’”

In the years after his announcement, much of the world seemed to turn on Bryan. He was financially and emotionally disowned. Family, doctors, and therapists gaslighted him. People that were once warm made him an object of ridicule.

There were pockets of acceptance. Many of his Iowa school teachers and administrators used his preferred name and pronouns. He was allowed

to use the office restroom. Still, many of his high school memories are those of struggle.

That struggle continues. Bryan moved back to Sioux Falls in January but he doesn’t plan to stay. Time constraints, confusion, and an overall distrust of area medical professionals mean Bryan and his boyfriend must drive 3.5 hours to Fargo-Moorhead to visit a gender-accepting clinic that allows the pair to make payments on a sliding scale. The inconvenience—combined with recent anti-trans/LGBTQ legislation—has Bryan planning to head to the West Coast as soon as possible.

He wants to be in a place where people accept him for who he is. He wants his physical body to match his true self. He just wants to be.

“Everyone is kind of against us, and that’s my biggest problem with this kind of stuff. We’re not doing anything wrong,” said Bryan.

“We’re just trying to live our life.”



# Wyatt

Age: 12 | Pronouns: he/him/his | Town: Sioux Falls, SD

When do you remember first realizing you were a boy or a girl? Wyatt can tell you. He was about three years old.

"I never said the words, 'I'm a boy,'" Wyatt says, "but I'd say 'I want to be a policeman when I grow up.' My mom would say, 'Great, but you would be a police woman.' I'd say, 'no, I will be a police MAN.'" Wyatt, as a toddler, was also set on being a daddy someday, not a mommy.

At 12 years old, Wyatt is a confident middle-schooler living in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. His story is anchored around his family, specifically his mom.

Wyatt came out to her in an eight page, single spaced letter. He was 10 years old. "I knew she would accept me, but I didn't know how she'd react." Wyatt said he remembers both parents saying, "We love you. We don't know what we'll do, but we love you." The family decided to wait for a while before letting others know.

"It didn't feel nice at the time, because I wanted to just get my hair cut and change my name quickly," he says, "but I'm glad we took it slow." His 7 year old sister took it in stride too. In fact, she mastered Wyatt's pronouns before his parents did.

The family rallied around Wyatt, taking him to get his hair cut ("it was a weight off my shoulders... literally") and talking to medical professionals who would become an important part of his team. "My pediatrician didn't have much experience with gender dysphoria," Wyatt said. "But my mom gave him some resources, and he became very interested in helping trans youth."

"A lot of families have heard our story and have started going to him," Wyatt says. "I think that is pretty cool."

Not all reactions were so positive. Wyatt's family had been part of a Baptist church for 18 years. Faith was – and is – an important part of their family.

"At first, my parents were really nervous to tell the church," Wyatt says. "It didn't end up well. Twelve families threatened to leave the church if they were 'forced' to call me Wyatt and use male pronouns for me."

That isn't the end of Wyatt's experience of the church, however. Besides attending a church in Sioux Falls occasionally, his family was invited to join a weekly 'house church' a while later which he says is going really well. "I actually got baptized a few months ago," he says. "That was awesome."

Wyatt uses his story to help educate elected officials and advocate for trans kids in South Dakota. The so-called "bathroom bills" are just one of the topics he's addressed.

"I should be able to go to the male restroom since I'm a male," Wyatt says. "I don't think anyone would be weirded out. Boys just want to get into the bathroom and get out. It's not like the girls bathroom where they like to talk."

The superintendent of Wyatt's school district has directed him to use the unisex bathrooms. It's clearly frustrating for him; he'd rather not be treated differently.

As for his peers, Wyatt's experience has been positive. The kids are supportive except a few who Wyatt says aren't nice to anyone. "I haven't been bullied at all. My mom was really surprised to hear that," he says. "She keeps checking on me."

South Dakota is one of the few states where transgender middle schoolers are not allowed to participate in extracurricular sports on teams that



match the students gender identity. This includes sports such as baseball, football, and wrestling. Wyatt explains this doesn't bother him too much ("I'm not a football guy") as he has found his family in the theater department. He's in show choir, loves acting and has sketchbooks full of portraits. Still, he'd like to see the middle school sports rule changed for the other transgender and gender non-conforming kids.

"I want people to understand that being trans is not something reserved for adults," Wyatt says. "And it's not scary. A lot of people think it's terrible that kids do this [come out] but really, gender identity develops around age three or four. For a lot of trans people, it doesn't take 20 years to figure out."

He wishes that elected officials would help trans

kids like him by becoming more educated about transgender people. "I wish people would meet an actual transgender person," he says. "Don't base what you think on a video or something you see on Twitter."

Wyatt says he's not sure he'll stay in South Dakota after he finishes high school. College in Florida sounds good to him. Or maybe a turn on Broadway as one of the first transgender leads. He has time.

"I try to be positive. I try to do things I enjoy to bring myself up instead of think about things that push me down," he says. "Surround yourself with the things and people that you love. Do whatever you need to do to more than survive."







## Alex

Age: 14 | Pronouns: he/him/his & they/them/theirs | Town: Watertown, SD

“I make sure to drink lots of water but I usually do it at home at the end of the day so I don’t have to use the bathroom, feel awkward, and have people stare at me.” Negative anti-trans legislation surrounding the use of bathrooms has been at the forefront of Alexander (Lex)’s mind while navigating middle school. As Lex enters his first year of high school in a new building, he is acutely aware of where all unisex bathrooms are located in his new school. “I learned there are three unisex bathrooms in the school, so I am going to feel more comfortable knowing where those places are,” Lex added.

Lex is 14 years old and knew as early as the second grade that he didn’t fit into any preconceived notion when it came to gender identity. It wasn’t until the summer after 6th

grade that Lex was able to put words to how he was feeling, first coming out as gay in 6th grade after a dance and then as non-binary and bi-gender before he started 8th grade. Lex has had his mom’s support since day one — something people in the trans community don’t always experience. Once Lex was able to form the words and gain the strength to open up to his mom, he remembers complete acceptance — the same acceptance and unconditional love he receives today. “I’m not afraid to be myself around my family, I know I can go out with my mom, having that safety barrier,” says Lex.

Not everything has been smooth sailing for Lex. He has faced some safety concerns in school, and recounts specific instances in which he was bullied in several classes.

He was able to find support in numerous teachers who gave him confidence to be himself. Lex serves as the Youth Ambassador for “Watertown Love” - LGBTQ youth, adults, and allies supporting each other in a safe space. Watertown Love was started following the suicide of Lex’s friend who identified as non-binary and pansexual. It was created as a safe space for LGBTQ individuals to come together for support.

Lex is an asset to his community. He finds inspiration in the movie ‘Zootopia’ because the characters are not stereotypical to how they are traditionally portrayed – a bunny can be a cop and a sloth can work in a fast-paced environment. Although Lex calls South Dakota home for now, he doesn’t think he will stay here. Lex plans to move to Minnesota expressing, “They are very open and I don’t have to be scared of holding hands with the person I love.” There are some things Lex feels could change his mind: having better access to

non-gendered bathrooms and seeing the state adopt better workplace non-discrimination policies. With policies such as these in place, Lex feels that South Dakota would be a more comfortable place to live.

For now, Lex will continue navigating his first year of high school in a new building finding the three unisex bathrooms in his school. He jokes, “We have three unisex bathrooms in our house.”



# Dylan

Age: 24 | Pronouns: he/him/his | Town: Vermillion, SD



Artist. Student. Father. A dude.

Dylan is many things, but he wants you to see how much he and other transgender people are like everyone else. “We’re just normal people who want to live our lives, have kids who grow up happy and healthy. Pay our bills,” he says.

He’d really like to be treated like everyone else. That hasn’t always been the case. As a non-traditional student at the University of South Dakota, he has repeated experiences with people who decide not to honor his pronouns.

“I went to the prof at the beginning of the semester and told him my story,” Dylan says. “He made it an issue. He addressed everyone as ‘sir’ or ‘miss’ and would call me ‘miss’ when I raised my hand. How hard is it to learn everyone’s names?”

For a class with a participation grade, it made things difficult. Dylan started missing classes and thought about dropping out entirely. The university handled the situation “graciously” according to Dylan and he was able to finish the semester.

The experience in the classroom is just one example of what transgender youth face. Dylan wishes that South Dakota state legislators could

get to know stories like his and protect the transgender community from discrimination, create spaces that are welcoming.

“Health care is a big issue,” Dylan says. “We understand our identities. [They should] drop the gatekeepers.”

Dylan gives the example of needing to get a psychologist’s letter in order to get a prescription for hormones filled. Transgender people often have to go out of network to get the care they need. That’s if they have health insurance at all. It’s especially difficult for those under 18 years old.

“I’m an adult,” he says. “I can make my own decisions about care, but even then it’s hard. ‘Go fund me’ shouldn’t be my insurance.”

Dylan remembers first hearing the term “transgender” when he was 10 or 11 years old. It was used in a television show about someone undergoing surgery, which he says was handled badly but made him think. He remembers looking at himself in the mirror and thinking to himself, “I’ll probably do that when I’m older.”

He identified as non-gender conforming for most of his childhood, often being mistaken for a boy more than even he realized. “I didn’t





see myself represented [in Sioux Falls] very often,” he says.

He remembers attending a music camp as a young person and getting to choose his pronouns. He didn’t realize how much that meant to him until it was time to go home. “Imagine two weeks of not hearing she/her,” he says. “I didn’t want to go back.”

Today, Dylan keeps those early experiences in mind in his music and in his studies. He’s in a band where he plays guitar and sings. He says he’d like to stay in South Dakota, because it is an awesome place to raise kids. He has two daughters, ages four and six, he co-parents with his former partner. And he has school to think about for now.

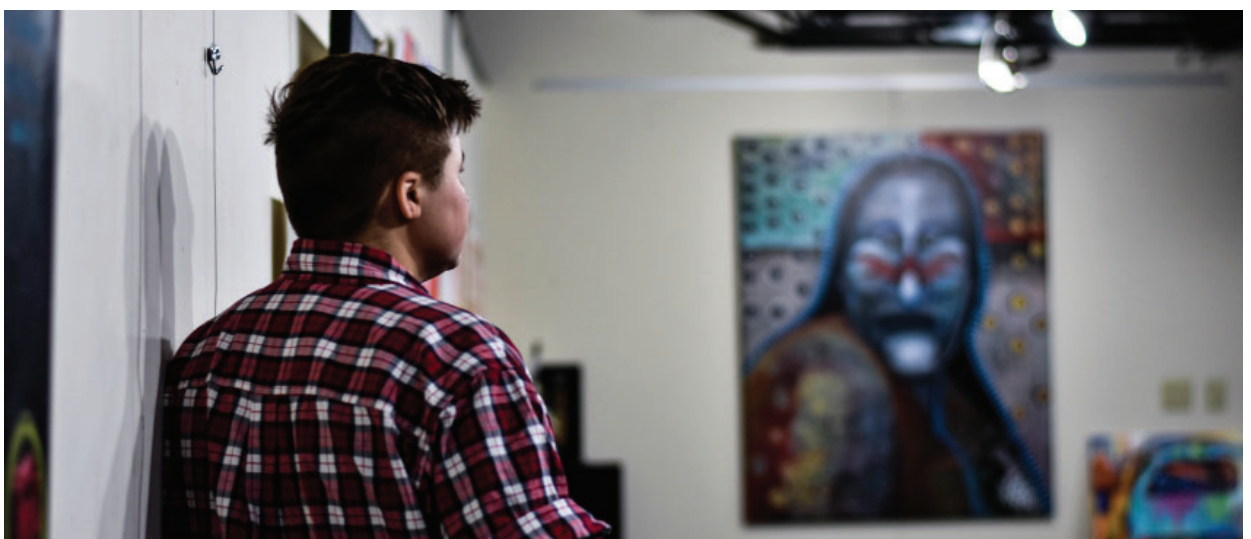
He’s studying to become a nurse practitioner who specializes in autoimmune disorders.

Dylan’s experiences as a transgender man give him a unique perspective, one he tries to bring into the classroom. “You can’t bring assumptions to the patient,” he says. “You might be looking at a woman who needs a prostate exam or a man who needs a pap smear.”

“I know a lot of trans people who avoid healthcare because of the hassle people give them,” he says. “We may have to be advocates for ourselves, even in healthcare.”

When asked if he minds being the one who speaks up in the classroom, Dylan laughs. “Oh man, it’s exhausting! Can I just be me?” Then he turns serious.

“We need more visibility in South Dakota,” Dylan says. “We’re not weird freaks. We’re among you. You’ve probably met us.”



Photos were taken at Post Pilgrim Gallery and feature the work of Jennifer White and Angelica Mercado.

# Aerin

Age: 14 | Pronouns: they/them/theirs | Town: Sioux Falls, SD

They is not a singular pronoun. That is what society instills in us, reinforcing it in high school English classes, making us choose a binary with which to refer to people and ourselves. What happens, though, when someone doesn't fit into a binary? When they float in between gender roles and stereotypes? You get a charming, thoughtful person like Aerin.

A sophomore in high school, Aerin identifies as non-binary, existing perfectly, just the way they were meant to exist. Aerin is an athlete who enjoys traveling, writing, and being outdoors. To their photoshoot, Aerin brought a trans pride flag and non-binary pride flag, proudly throwing them over their shoulder and climbing a mossy tree for the perfect shot. Aerin chose Sertoma Park as the location for the photoshoot because of their love for nature and the outdoors. The park, its trails, and secret spots also reminded them of places their family would go to visit on one of their many road trips.

Aerin spoke a lot about being non-binary in a world where binaries are the norm. As a passionate, dedicated wrestler, they find themselves worried about safety and acceptance within the wrestling world. They recalled an incident at a camp where a group of fellow wrestlers were trying to guess if Aerin was a boy or a girl. Motivation to focus on wrestling helps Aerin ignore these comments.

Aerin also recalls hearing about HB1225, or the 2019 legislative bill that would not allow trans athletes to participate on teams that align with their gender identity. While this wouldn't have necessarily impacted Aerin, they were concerned about how this might have affected trans athletes around the state.

Locker rooms and bathrooms were also on Aerin's mind as they prepare for another school year to begin. Like many other trans and non-binary students, Aerin doesn't have easy access to a family bathroom in their school. This is an issue they think needs some attention from school administrators, noting that sometimes the only options for trans and non-binary students at their school are options that aren't accommodating at all.

Aerin is doing their best to navigate this binary world as a non-binary person and has found guidance and support through meeting other non-binary kids their age. Their family is also learning all they can about their child's identity so that Aerin doesn't have to figure this out alone.

It's been apparent through this conversation and many others just how vital supportive, encouraging family are to the well-being of a kid who identifies as trans or non-binary. Unfortunately, for trans and non-binary youth, there are often feelings of shame and fear of disappointing those closest to them, but when families are able to work on educating themselves and accepting their child's identity, everyone wins.

As was mentioned before, Aerin is a writer, penning an essay that won National Gold Key recognition about coming out after their English teacher encouraged them to submit it to a competition. That essay is featured later in this magazine, so make sure to check that out!









# Oliver

Age: 11 | Pronouns: he/him/his | Town: Sioux Falls, SD

Oliver is about to enter 6th grade this year, making him one of the youngest to be featured in the magazine. Oliver, a wise 11-year-old, spent his summer drawing, watching TV, and traveling with his family. Oh, and attending midnight premieres of movies, including the new Spider-Man.

Beaming, Oliver said, “Yeah I went to it at midnight. It was good.” Oliver will draw anything and everything and enjoys older sitcoms, like *Malcolm in the Middle*, which was introduced to him by his dad.

It’s apparent that Oliver is a seriously fun-loving kid, reminiscing about a time he chased a goose he wanted to pet it and maybe even hold, which didn’t work out so well. Laughing, he said, “It just started flapping at me. I was so scared.”

He first heard the word “transgender” when he was just 6 years old after seeing a YouTube documentary about it. He also mentioned that one of his friends posted about wanting to be a boy on another social media platform, and some things started to click for Oliver.

After his own research, he found validation in his feelings, realizing that he was trans. The first people he talked to about this were two of his best friends, who supported him. Oliver also found support in his school counselor, who implored that Oliver let her know if he was experiencing bullying. While

he has encountered some rude schoolmates, he chooses to ignore them, ensuring to surround himself with his friends that support him.

When asked about what his teachers, school administrators, friends, community, and politicians could do to support him better, Oliver focused on one thing: bathrooms. He stressed how important it is to let trans people use the bathrooms that align with their gender identity.

He explained further stating, “They say we can use the nurse’s bathroom and they act like it’s so nice, but it’s not because it’s super far away.

The other kids then want to know why I’m using the nurse’s bathroom.” This spotlight on Oliver’s bathroom trips can turn into a safety situation if it results in outing him to people that may not know that Oliver is trans.

Oliver thinks that a lot of people don’t understand that being trans is not a choice. He didn’t choose to have gender dysphoria; nobody does, but everyone has a choice to educate themselves about gender identity and work to be more inclusive.

Oliver’s confidence and way of living his life passionately are contagious and inspiring. No kid should have to spend so much effort and time into making other people feel





## Quinn

Age: 16 | Pronouns: they/them/theirs | Town: Sioux Falls, SD

If your trust in humanity ever waivers, try talking to Quinn. You'll find a passionate, purposeful conversationalist who truly believes that knowledge is power and someone who is always ready to talk about history, Dungeons and Dragons, and everything in between. Quinn identifies as non-binary or androgynous and uses they/them/theirs as their pronouns. A junior in high school, Quinn is all about family, friends, and horror stories, even working to compile an anthology of local scary stories.

Quinn has only lived in one house their entire life, meaning they are a South Dakotan in the truest sense of the term. Legacy Park was the original location that Quinn chose for their photoshoot and interview; however, a surprise summer downpour forced the team to run through puddles to cars and conduct the rest of the interview in drenched clothes. The impromptu re-location didn't faze Quinn, though.

Quinn provided a unique perspective of a Sioux Falls high school's environment for trans and non-binary kids. Surprisingly, the school has a process in place for kids who identify as trans or non-binary. While there are gaps in the process and Quinn has struggled with people adapting to using their new name and pronouns, they see the teachers and staff trying their best to welcome Quinn and others like them.

Restrooms are, not surprisingly, one of the hardest parts of being a non-binary student in a South Dakota public school. Using the restroom at school is hard for Quinn because they feel uncomfortable in either restroom, and Quinn has seen hostile reactions to others who identify as trans or non-binary being dragged out of restrooms by teachers. Public restrooms are no different for them; in fact, Quinn recalls instances of adults physically stopping them from entering a restroom. This of course has led to safety concerns for



Quinn when having to use the restroom in a public place.

Another area of struggle that Quinn discusses is when they had to spend time getting care for their mental health in Sioux Falls. Instead of being in an inclusive, comforting environment where they could heal, Quinn was forced to use their dead name and old pronouns. All around them, Quinn watched as trans kids were put in dangerous situations by the people that were supposed to be helping them get better. Quinn hopes this place and others like it learn to recognize the harm they cause by forcing patients to use incorrect pronouns and dead names.

The legislative process sparks an animated discussion about restrooms, the cost of restrooms signs, and school curriculum. “A school is meant

for learning. If they banned discussing sexual orientation and gender identity then they’d have to ban Greek and Norse mythology from [the curriculum]!” Quinn says, exasperated at the recent legislative attacks on learning. Quinn would love to see the legislature pass a bill that would let “x” be used as a gender marker on birth certificates and driver’s licenses in South Dakota so that others who identify as non-binary aren’t forced to select between two binaries that aren’t accurate.

Quinn’s parting words were this: “We’re still kids. We’re still people. We are not any less human. No less brave. This isn’t shouldn’t be something that they have to fight for.”



IN 2019, THE SOUTH DAKOTA PUBLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION (SDPHA) CONDUCTED A SURVEY AT SIOUX FALLS PRIDE. THERE WAS A SMALL SAMPLE OF THOSE WHO IDENTIFIED AS TRANSGENDER (TRANS) OR NON-BINARY; NONETHELESS, THE RESULTS PROVIDE AN IMPORTANT SNAPSHOT OF GROUP THAT IS OFTEN LEFT OUT OF DISCUSSIONS.

<b>TRANS</b> (ALL AGES)	<b>69%</b> HARMED THEMSELVES	<b>56%</b> CONSIDERED SUICIDE	<b>50%</b> ATTEMPTED SUICIDE
<b>TRANS</b> (AGES 11-25)	<b>67%</b> HARMED THEMSELVES	<b>42%</b> CONSIDERED SUICIDE	<b>33%</b> ATTEMPTED SUICIDE
<b>NON- BINARY</b> (AGES 11-25)	<b>100%</b> HARMED THEMSELVES	<b>100%</b> CONSIDERED SUICIDE	<b>100%</b> ATTEMPTED SUICIDE

*SURVEY PARTICIPANTS WERE ASKED WHAT THEY'D LIKE OTHERS TO KNOW ABOUT THEM:*

“I am just a person trying to live my life.”

“Being gay or trans is not a choice.”

“Representation & advocacy outside pride month is more important than being at pride.”

“Queer people are like you in so many ways. We just want to be safe, accepted, and protected.”

“Silence is violence. Be on the right side of history.”

“I’m proud of who I am.”

## THEMES FROM *TRANSFORMING SOUTH DAKOTA* INTERVIEWS:

PUBLIC RESTROOMS CAUSED ANXIETY

SUPPORT & RESOURCES WERE HARD TO FIND

CAME OUT BETWEEN 2014-2016

HEALTH CARE INEQUITIES (LACK OF INSURANCE,  
RESOURCES, KNOWLEDGEABLE PROVIDERS)

SEEING OTHER PEOPLE LIKE THEM HAD POSITIVE EFFECTS

## NATIONAL DATA



Created by: @dissidentfrom  
from: @dissidentfrom

The singular “they” was used as early as the 1800s. Shakespeare & Jane Austen often used they as singular in their work.



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from: @dissidentfrom

42.1% of transgender & gender non-conforming students were not allowed to use the correct name or pronouns in school



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13 states & D.C. protect trans students from discrimination in public schools



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from: @dissidentfrom

6 states (CA, MD, MA, NY, OR, VT) have updated their medicaid rules to provide hormone therapy for trans people



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from: @dissidentfrom

Transgender & gender non-conforming students faced more hostile environments



46.5% transgender & gender non-conforming could not use the correct bathroom



## NATIONAL EVENTS

## SD LEGISLATURE

2015

"I am Jazz" debuts on TLC  
First openly trans White House staff person is hired  
The TV show "Transparent" wins a Golden Globe  
For the first time ever, "transgender" is mentioned in a State of the Union address by President Obama

2 bills targeting the trans community are introduced

First trans "bathroom bill" introduced

2016

The Pentagon lifts the ban on transgender service members  
Obama administration says trans students should be allowed to use restrooms and locker rooms that match their gender identity

4 bills targeting the trans community are introduced

2017

Trump administration rescinds Obama directive allowing students to use restrooms and locker rooms that match their gender identity  
First openly trans candidate was elected to a State Legislature

1 bill targeting the trans community are introduced

2018

Miss Universe has its first openly trans contestant

3 bills targeting the trans community are introduced

2019

Trump administration bans most trans people from military

4 bills targeting the trans community are introduced

# *A Parent's Musings*

In the words of my Lakota relatives, I say: Mitakuyepi, iyuha chantewasteya napechiyuzapi. Lakol micaze kin Chinca Ahokila emaciyapelo (Relatives, I greet each of you with a good heart and a handshake. My Lakota name is Cinca Ahokila – He who honors and cherishes his children). I am also called Mark Daniels or Papa D, and I am the very proud father of seven amazing children including my transgender son, Dylan. My journey as a parent of a transgender child has enhanced my life with a profound, meaningful, and assorted array of emotions and life experiences. Here are some of them that I would like to share in a letter I composed to Dylan.

My Dear Son Dylan,

I was so privileged to be at your birth years ago. My heart stopped when yours did with the umbilical cord wrapped around your neck. Luckily, you've always been gifted at working your way out of bind. Consequently, your mom and I were able to share the abundant joy we felt when she delivered you into this world, as a beautiful bundle of radiant love. I want you to know that I am immeasurably proud when I see you mindfully and heartfully share your authentic self, and be a respectful, yet powerful voice for the trans and nonbinary community...as speaker, a songwriter and singer, and as a storyteller like in these pages.

Be aware that I suffered deep in my soul to see you temporarily withdraw from our spiritual community, not sure how you would fit in, nor how our community, who had always lovingly embraced you, would receive you. I also want you to know that I feel so proud of and thoroughly connected to our family- young and old, across generations- past, present, and future, as we trust our hearts and learn or relearn to walk with you, stride for sacred stride.

Recognize how irate I felt when you had to continuously correct one of your professors who repeatedly misgendered you throughout the term until you finally had to walk out of class one final time, midsemester, to maintain your dignity or when you were shamed and harassed for using the men's restroom.

All the same, I have been and continue to be movingly humbled by the enormous love and support you have been blessed with from countless people throughout this process, from our family, your friends, our Sundance and my Church community, your past teachers from your days in public school, total strangers, folx in the music and art community, and so many other activists, allies, and advocates, ranging from them tearfully connecting as you shared your transition story to fundraising literally thousands of dollars to support your gender affirming top surgery to testifying before legislative committees. WOW!!!

True, I have been challenged by some state legislators, clergy, and other ill-informed zealots who throw stones at you and other transgender and nonbinary people when they don't know you and have never spent time with you. But ultimately, I have been empowered to follow the light of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and so many others enlightened ones and choose love over hate. I am immensely grateful for a land, a country, a government by the people, for the people, that professes that ALL human beings are created equal with an unalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

In closing, know my dear son, how abundantly I love you and how much I cherish our close connection. Everyday I embrace this chance I have to walk hand in hand and heart to heart with you, through his transition and through life in general; from being the first to hold your precious newborn body to seeing you take your first injection of gender affirming testosterone. From being by your side when you went into gender affirming top surgery to watching you come out the man you've always known you are.

In the sacred words of ceremony, Mitakuye Oyasin—We are all related,

Your Dad, Papa D

# Three Ways to Make Your Church a Welcoming Place for Transgender Youth

By Austen Hartke

Have you ever driven past a church that sports an “All are welcome!” sign and thought, “Hmm, I wonder if that includes me?”

While most of us don’t have to think twice about whether we’d be welcomed into a church community, this doubt is a reality for LGBTQ+ youth nationwide. Unfortunately, because of the social narrative that tells us that Christians and LGBTQ+ people are on opposing sides of the “culture wars,” many people of different sexual orientations and gender identities have to assume that they’re not safe in Christian spaces. Even when a church tries to advertise their welcome to people who might have historically been turned away, if the church isn’t specific about who they’re welcoming studies show that people from marginalized communities assume that the welcome isn’t for them.

So if it’s not as simple as saying “We’re welcoming!” what can churches here in the Midwest do to affirm and support our transgender and nonbinary young people? Let’s take a look at three different ways we can make our churches compassionate and knowledgeable.

## **1. Use gender-inclusive language in worship and community activities.**

While many pastors might be in the habit of addressing the congregation on Sunday by saying, “Good morning, brothers and sisters in Christ!” gendered greetings like this can alienate our nonbinary youth and make them feel as if they’re not part of our community. Instead, we can begin saying “siblings in Christ,” or even adding on to the original phrase by saying “brothers and sisters and siblings,” which helps everyone feel seen and valued.

Similarly, gendered language can often get in the way when it comes to music. How many times have you seen the bulletin or screen say “Men sing verse 1, women on verse 2?” This leaves many nonbinary folks feeling left out, and many

trans men and trans women feeling self-conscious about their voice being a little different. Next time, try breaking people up into “high voices and low voices” instead.

## **2. Speak positively about gender diversity.**

When you’ve grown up hearing only negative things about LGBTQ+ people in church, it’s pretty easy to get excited by a church that doesn’t say anything at all. Being neutral is better than being actively unaffirming, right? Unfortunately, because of that social stigma we talked about earlier, youth who attend churches where LGBTQ+ people aren’t talked about negatively OR positively tended to assume that their church wouldn’t be affirming if they came out, and that fear can lead to isolation and negative mental health outcomes.

This is why it’s so important for churches to move from a neutral stance to one that actively speaks positively about diversity of all kinds, including gender diversity. When a new movie that centers a trans character comes out, would the church be interested in having a movie night and discussion? Do you have any transgender clergy members in your denomination, and how might you hold them up as visible role models? Does the pastor ever reference writing by trans scholars and theologians in their sermon? Does the youth leader include stories of biblical gender-nonconformers like Deborah, Joseph, or the Ethiopian eunuch in youth group? All of these actions and more signal to trans and nonbinary young people that this community is one that supports them and loves them and is open to hearing their stories.

## **3. Give people the opportunity to be seen and known.**

A new study from the University of Texas at Austin recently found that transgender youth ages 15 to 21 who had their chosen name used at school, at home, at work, and with friends had 71% fewer symptoms of depression and a 65% decrease in suicide attempts. Having their chosen



name used in even one of those four contexts brought their number of suicidal thoughts down by 29%. These statistics speak to the power of being seen and recognized for who you are—even if you're only being truly seen in one place in your life! Our churches have the power to become one of those places for our trans youth. If we do nothing else, we should always make sure that we're using the right name and pronouns for every member of our community.

But how do you find out somebody's pronouns, and how do you make the changeover less awkward for people who want to use new ones? One move that's catching on in churches is the inclusion of pronouns on nametags, even if nametag Sunday only happens once a month. By asking every member of the community to include their pronouns on their nametag you foster conversations about what pronouns are and why they're important, and having that conversation shows trans youth that their congregation is invested in supporting them.

No matter which step your church decides to begin with, the movement towards affirmation of our transgender and nonbinary youth is essential for the future of our faith. When we come together as one body, beautiful in our particularities and differences, we are better able to show love to the world.



Austen Hartke is the author of “Transforming: The Bible and the Lives of Transgender Christians” (Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), and the creator of the YouTube series “Transgender and Christian.” As a transgender person of faith, Austen's greatest passion is helping other trans and gender-non-conforming people see themselves in scripture.

You can find out more about his work at [www.austenhartke.com](http://www.austenhartke.com).

#### Suggested Resources for Further Reading:

*Transforming: The Bible and the Lives of Transgender Christians* by Austen Hartke

*Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relationships* by James Brownson

*Embracing the Journey: A Christian Parents' Blueprint to Loving Your LGBTQ Child* by Greg & Lynn McDonald

*Beyond a Binary God: A Theology for Trans Allies* by Tara Soughers

*Our Witness: The Unheard Stories of LGBT+ Christians* by Brandon Robertson



# CAKE

By Aerin



A cake. I was going to bake a cake; I was sure. I had thought that it would be easy; I loved baking (I still do), and no one can be really mad at someone who gives them cake, right? It would have had my flag on it in frosting: yellow, white, purple, and black, top to bottom. I would've written some message on it trying to make it seem almost like a joke. But it didn't happen because life is just like that, and being nonbinary is an unheard of and is an unpleasant thing to be.

The first time I "came out" (not counting to my close friends) wasn't difficult or scary since I didn't care all that much what they thought. I had asked someone who I believed was good at spreading rumors to tell everyone on the day I had come to school free of my long hair that I said that I'm not a boy or a girl. This was not a smart decision, as she promptly stood up and shouted it across the already-chaotic room. She actually thought that was how she was supposed to do it, and for the most part, it worked. My best friend told me I was brave for telling people, and maybe I believed it then.

When I was in the backseat of our car in November, sobbing so hard my legs were going numb, I didn't feel brave. I was crying because a wrestling coach in another

county referring to me as 'she' had been the straw that broke the camel's back, and a joke about my "punk haircut" in the car had been another anvil dropped on the camel's leg. So my dad wouldn't leave the town we were in until I told him why I was crying. He thought it was about wrestling, unsurprisingly, and I couldn't come up with an excuse as to why I was still bawling after ten minutes of driving in circles around the park. So I had to tell him then, with no pretty cake or silly message. "I'm not a girl," I had blurted out incoherently between gasps and sobs.

There was a short confused pause from my dad, and then, "Yes you are." And I started crying harder because although he didn't know, that was about the worst possible thing he could say. "Do you think you're a boy?" he asked.

"No!" I wailed, pathetically. My dad was the more befuddled I had ever seen him in my life. So I explained, slowly and through many tears, what nonbinary was. He was confused and asked too many questions, but I wasn't kicked out of the house, and I wasn't laughed at. That's much better than many others can hope for. But I was still shaking by the time we got home, and of course, Dad said I had to tell my mom. Immediately. My mom didn't seem surprised, and she didn't need the definition of nonbinary. When my

oldest brother came home from college for a weekend, I had to tell him, too. He made too many jokes about it and asked too many questions. And when I had to tell my other brother, who was a senior in high school that December, we were alone in the car, which was uncanny in its familiarity.

My parents had told me to ride home with him on the way back from Sioux Falls, and so I did. I told him, and he didn't laugh, and he didn't make jokes like our college brother did. He got angry. He had told me he disliked America for making people think things about themselves that are ridiculous, unchangeable, and untrue. He said things about science and chromosomes and me being his sister. I told him I was his sibling, not his sister, and his rage got colder. It was the kind of anger that is quiet and cold; it was more terrifying than any fire-filled anger or words lashing out. It was precise and hurtful, striking in just the spots that would

hurt most, like a snake. His voice was quiet. He told me that I was betraying and spitting on all the memories that he had with me, that he had filed under "Memories with my Little Sister." Afterwards, he still called me 'sister' and 'she', and pretended it never happened, for months avoiding the subject.

But it has been nearly ten months since then, and he apologized for it all a few months ago, although he still says 'sister.' I understand that nothing about this will ever be easy, that some people can't understand us or won't accept us, but I am not nearly as afraid anymore. I know life isn't a piece of cake, but I also know I will not curl up in a ball and cry when the world says I don't exist, or that I'm 'mentally ill,' or any other insults or jabs. I have friends who understand me and a family that's trying to. These events and months have made me stronger; I am proud of it, no matter what anyone else thinks.



About:

"Miles (my boyfriend) and I hold being trans and gay very close to our hearts. This is a picture of us holding those things up and showing the world how proud we are to be trans and gay. We shouldn't have to hide in fear anymore, we should be able to wear our identities proudly and publicly." - Bryan





Excuse my beauty!  
Your barbed questions cannot pierce this soft skin.  
I will not bleed  
I will not even notice the prick.  
I am invulnerable,  
made solid by so many attempts at vanishing.

For years I imagined new ways to disappear,  
to fit myself between floorboards & door frames--  
I was walked on & walked through--  
but my magic has changed & I do not seek invisibility anymore so...

Excuse my Beauty!  
I have learned to tend my own garden,  
I am in full bloom.  
My roots run deep into the ground &  
I have no interest in making room for those who would prune me,  
who would label me imprudent for having the audacity to be seen.

I will not hide,  
quiet & palatable.  
I will grow 50 feet tall.  
My voice will boom across the prairie,  
Deep & Feminine.

So stare,  
if you want.  
I look good & I know my worth & I will not be erased because...

I come from women who,  
in a world ravenous for their blood,  
walk always with dignity & light.  
Goddesses, impervious & eternal.

It is to them I pray.  
It is their Spirit that sustains me.  
It is with their breath in my lungs I say:  
Excuse My Beauty!

*Written By: Eve*

*This poem was written to honor & to celebrate  
Stephanie Yellowhair, a Navajo trans woman who passed away last year.*

# The Transformation Project

September 3, 2019 marked the launch of The Transformation Project, a new South Dakota based non-profit organization. The mission of the Transformation Project is to support and empower transgender youth, young adults, and their families while educating communities in South Dakota and the surrounding region about gender identity and expression.

Far too many transgender youth and young adults in our state and region have faced misunderstanding, hostility, and outright discrimination simply because of who they are. This has created a climate where kids live in fear of being their true selves, where parents who are desperate for community are increasingly isolated, and where vulnerable people feel powerless. We are determined to change that narrative and turn our state into a place where communities embrace their transgender neighbors, where every family has a support network, and where transgender kids can live safely and authentically. Our vision is one where every young person knows they are loved, valued, and empowered to make their dreams a reality.

“Many people have pre-conceived ideas about transgender individuals, and one of our goals is to help provide education about what it means to be transgender,” said Jessica Meyers, Chairperson of the Transformation Project Board of Directors. “Gender is how you think and feel on the inside, while your sex is based on your anatomy. For most people, these two items are aligned, but for transgender individuals, there is a mismatch between their gender and their sex at birth.”

“We know our transgender youth and young adults face challenges, especially in

South Dakota, and we are glad that we can help to provide support and encouragement to them and their families,” said Susan Williams, founder and Executive Director of the Transformation Project. “Over the last two years I’ve had the privilege of meeting dozens of transgender young people from across South Dakota. The Transformation Project is providing a community for these young people and their families where they can learn from each other and navigate their journeys together.”

Transgender youth and young adults are some of the most vulnerable people in our state. In a recent study done at Sioux Falls Pride by the South Dakota Public Health Association, 69% of transgender individuals reported self-harm, 56% considered suicide, and 50% attempted suicide. “Self-harm and suicide are important public health issues, and we all need to work together to address these disparities in our state. We can start by educating ourselves, our colleagues, and our communities about gender identity,” said SDPHA President and Transformation Project Board of Directors Member, Michaela Seiber.

For the past five years, transgender people in South Dakota have faced the threat of discriminatory legislation in the state Capitol and demeaning commentary from some elected officials and public leaders. Additionally, transgender youth and their families have had to advocate for themselves to ensure they are being treated fairly in their schools, workplaces, and communities. Though this has been a significant burden, it has also presented an opportunity for transgender youth to develop advocacy skills that have helped them feel empowered and capable. Given the barriers to

fair treatment that the community continues to face, it is critical that transgender people and their families are empowered to be their own champions.

The Transformation Project believes that transgender people know what is best for them and that they are experts in their own lives. We seek to empower transgender youth, young adults, and their families and prepare them to advocate for the rights they deserve.

The Transformation Project is proud to be unveiling a new publication, *Transforming South Dakota*, that highlights the stories of Transgender youth and young adults from across South Dakota. "Each of these young people has a story, and we are excited to give them a voice," added Board of Directors member, Danielle Wilcox.

The Transformation Project has started raising funds for these initiatives and has also been awarded a grant from the Sioux Falls Area Community Foundation for start-up

expenses. "We are extremely grateful for those that have already chosen to partner with us, and we look forward to spreading the word about our organization in the coming months," shared Susan Williams.

The Transformation Project website, [www.transformationprojectsd.org](http://www.transformationprojectsd.org) contains resources for parents, educators and allies as well as information on support groups. The organization also provides a Welcoming Kit, free of charge, to families with a transgender child, and to transgender young adults.



Transformation Project Welcome Kit for New Families.



## MEET THE CREATORS OF TRANSFORMING SOUTH DAKOTA



**Danielle**

Pronouns: she/her/hers

Town: Sioux Falls, SD

First, a BIG thank you to everyone who shared their stories, voices, and experiences with us. As Michaela and I interviewed all 14 participants, we found there were a few commonalities between these stories. First, almost everyone responded that they had to educate themselves on trans identities. Most did not have any trans people in their lives and had never knowingly met a trans person before. To me, that signifies a real lack of visibility in this state. This is something that we are going to change by sharing the stories in this magazine. But the most inspiring theme that seemed to run through all the interviews is everyone is incredibly proud of who they are. In spite of a serious lack of resources, extreme political opposition, and, often times, rejection from family and friends, all those interviewed exhibited a sense of pride and happiness in themselves that is truly inspiring. These kids and young adults are incredible examples of resilience and they are some of the bravest people I have ever met. Their stories are going to change South Dakota, I know they have changed me.



**Michaela**

Pronouns: she/her/hers

Town: Sioux Falls, SD

Hey everyone! Thanks for checking this project out. Danielle and I began this adventure in June 2019; it's unreal that it all came together and we get to share it with you. This project has been something I have always wanted to do, but it wasn't until the right people heard my thoughts that it finally got momentum. I find people in South Dakota hold a lot of misunderstanding and ignorance around gender identity, which has led to some unfortunate things happening in our state. My goal with this project has always been to educate. A lot of people tell me they are worried about offending people by saying something wrong or it's hard for them to use "they" as a singular pronoun. We are at a point in our state's history where we have to get past this uncomfortableness. We need to change and become more inclusive. It's life or death.



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Facebook | Transformation Project SD  
Instagram | /sdtransformproj & /TransformingSoDak

Visit [www.transformationprojectsd.org](http://www.transformationprojectsd.org) for more information.