

TRANSFORMING SOUTH DAKOTA

A magazine highlighting the stories of transgender South Dakotans and their families.



Volume 3, 2023

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|----|
| Welcome | 4 |
| The World is More Than a Binary | 6 |
| Stories | 8 |
| Remembering Acey D. Morrison | 34 |
| Lakota Mourning Song | 37 |
| Trevor Project 2022 National Survey on LGBTQ Youth South Dakota Statistics | 38 |
| Terminology | 44 |
| Marty's Closet | 47 |
| Remembering Annie Lanning | 48 |
| True Community | 49 |
| Transformation Project | 50 |

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Thank you to The Trevor Project for allowing us to include statistics and graphics from their 2022 National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health. For more information about the survey and to see additional statistics, visit <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/survey-2022/>

To purchase additional copies of Transforming South Dakota Magazine, go to www.transformationprojectsd.org and click on "shop." To request free copies for your non-profit organization, email magazine@transformationprojectsd.org.

One.

One accepting adult is all it takes to decrease the suicide risk for LGBTQ youth by 40%.

This startling statistic is among the many reasons we at the Transformation Project are working to advocate for and educate others about the lived experiences of transgender people in South Dakota.

Welcome to the 3rd edition of our publication Transforming South Dakota. Over the last few years, we've introduced you to some of the amazing transgender and nonbinary people that call South Dakota and the surrounding areas home.

In this issue, we want to introduce you to their families - the people who have taken the journey with their transgender and nonbinary loved ones. Some have struggled, some have always known, some have had a smooth transition, and some are still adjusting. Regardless, the common thread in these stories is the willingness to take the journey with the trans people in their lives. It is not always easy, but it's worth it.

You may have come across this publication because you are a supportive loved one looking to learn more. Or you may be scared, angry, or confused. We can assure you that any feeling you have has been shared by at least one family member or another in our journey to being the best we can be for our trans loved ones.

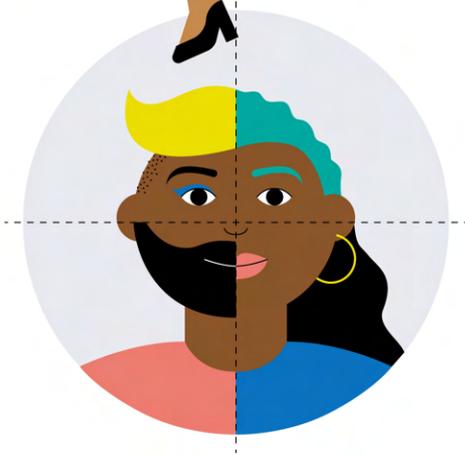
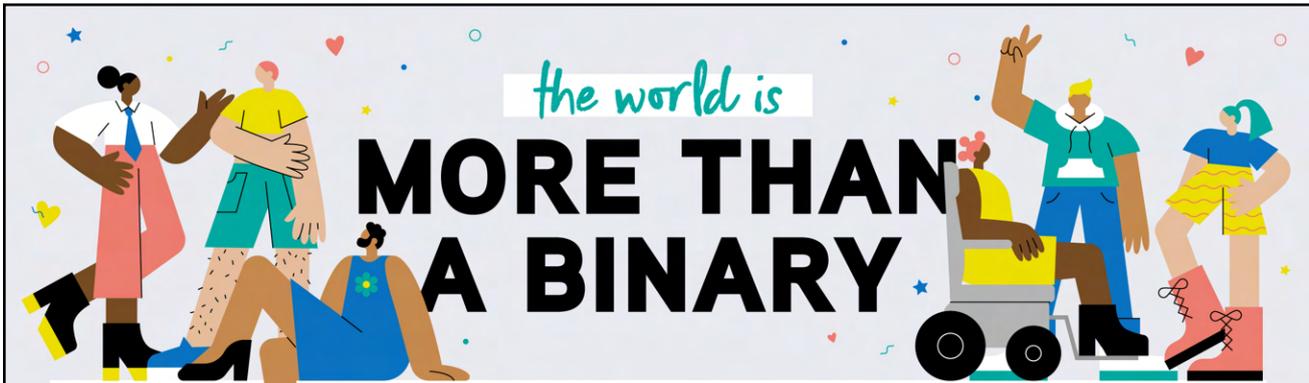
In a time of growing hostility and attacks on the rights of trans people, we feel our work is critical now. Each family took the time to be interviewed and dared to tell their story. Please take the time to read their stories and open your heart.

The Transforming South Dakota magazine committee includes trans people, parents, friends, and other allies from communities right here in South Dakota. We are working hard to educate others about our loved ones, so others may see them as we see them. Worthy of acceptance. Worthy of respect and admiration. Worthy of love.

We're happy you're here. By opening your heart to the trans community, you could end up being the one who makes a positive impact on a transgender person's life.

With love and gratitude,
The Transforming South Dakota Magazine Committee





Many of us were taught to think about reproductive organs, gender identity, and gender expression in terms of a binary. 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.

However, people can live anywhere within these definitions, leading to a world filled with people made up of different combinations of identities. The world is so much more rich and complex than a simple binary allows.



Gender identity is one's own concept of who they are—male, female, both, or neither. Individuals are the only ones who can truly determine their own gender identity.



At birth, people are often assigned their gender based on the genitalia they possess. But **sex and gender are two different things**. Sometimes sexual and reproductive anatomy doesn't fit the typical definition, and those people are described as intersex.



Gender expression is the clothing and behaviors you display to show the world who you are. They way people choose to express their gender can rely on what their culture or society expects of a particular gender role. Some people don't feel masculine or feminine and may choose to dress gender-neutral. Some people may identify as a man or woman, but express themselves in a gender non-conforming way. All of these expressions are valid!

WE MATTER. OUR STORIES MATTER.



ASHER

“Now we know why that was so difficult.”

When you hear Asher speak, you would think he was well beyond his thirteen years. You get the sense that he really thinks things through and wants to learn more about everything.

“He’s very inquisitive. He’s always asking why. He’s very creative and really kind. He wants to change the world. He just wants everybody to be accepted,” his mom, Elizabeth describes.

His dad Brian echoes this description. “He’s a very sweet kid, cares a lot. He definitely cares a lot about the world around him and other people.”

Asher likes to skateboard, draw, and play guitar, and has two younger siblings. He is a typical kid with a pretty typical family.

Around age eleven, Asher approached his mom to tell her that he felt like a girl and boy at the same time. This initial revelation wasn’t met with much alarm or attention, maybe because Asher had always been a “tomboy.” But after a deeper conversation with his dad, Asher admitted that he was identifying as non-binary.

His dad Brian says of the announcement, “I wasn’t surprised by any means. We talked through how he was feeling. Growing up, he was very tomboyish. So I wouldn’t say it was a huge shock.”

After some time identifying as non-binary, Asher started to realize that he was, in fact, a transgender boy. His parents are divorced, and he was at his dad’s house when he



decided to tell his parents.

“I got a text message from him with a trans flag, and it said Don’t panic, I’m trans,” Elizabeth says. “I have a couple of family members that are trans. So it really wasn’t anything new for me. The territory wasn’t new or anything like that.”

She adds, “I think definitely, looking back now, there were things that happened during childhood and early adolescence that it just makes sense.”

The extreme anxiety about dressing feminine for family pictures and the

reluctance to do more stereotypically feminine things like wear makeup and do his hair were minor compared to the discomfort Asher started to feel as he approached puberty.

“The beginning of puberty was really traumatic. And now, looking back, it’s like, oh, that makes sense. Now we know why that was so difficult. “

Asher is fortunate to have complete support from his parents and also from a good amount of his extended family.

Brian says, “I think overall, my immediate family, my parents, and my siblings have all been very supportive. I have a really large close family. They all live in northeastern Nebraska, so we see them pretty regularly. I think they struggle more just trying to remember pronouns and, you know, if we saw them more frequently, I think it’d be a little easier, but sometimes they slip up.”

Elizabeth’s experience with her family has been more complex. “My siblings are very supportive. They didn’t even bat an eye. My mother is very conservative, very religious, and my sister is trans. So when my sister came out, [my mother] was not okay with it. So I haven’t really had any contact with my mom.”

She goes on, “My mom’s side of the family is not necessarily unsupportive, but they have just kind of fizzled us out of their life. So they’re not necessarily being hateful, but I guess when you ignore people, that can be just as harmful and hurtful as well.”

“...you can’t just go through life floating and being indifferent to things.”

Before Elizabeth’s sister came out as transgender, neither she nor Brian had any

real exposure to trans people. They took the opportunity to educate themselves and learn what they could.

Elizabeth says, “It was just like, okay, let’s get some books. Let’s read up on things. The last six years of my life have really made me pay a lot more attention to the world around me and how people are treated. Before everything, if it didn’t directly affect me, it was a status quo type of thing. But this has really made me take a stand with things and realize that you can’t just go through life floating and being indifferent to things.”

Brian says, “[Compared to] When I grew up, it just feels like such a different era, where it wasn’t something that people talked about. I’m from a small town in South Dakota and my family is from Nebraska. There’s no exposure.”



Like many people in South Dakota, Brian's exposure to LGBTQ people was limited to gay relatives or friends or what he saw on TV. But he's glad that things are changing in time for Asher's generation to feel accepted. And he wants others to be comfortable with learning about different types of people and open their eyes to trans people's experiences.

"I'm still learning every day, and I screw up a lot. But it's cool that people can be open and be who they are now. I think that's exciting for me because I couldn't imagine Ash growing up and going through this because it'd be tough."

"Why have this division? Why focus on people's authenticity?"

When asked if he plans to leave South Dakota, Asher starts nodding "yes" before

the question is even finished.

"I really want to leave South Dakota really bad, and honestly, I want to leave this entire country."

And it's no wonder. Asher carries a weight that a lot of thirteen-year-olds aren't carrying. He's navigating his sense of self, along with the typical experiences of a middle schooler, all while wearing a target on his back put there by some in the South Dakota Legislature.

Over the last eight years, over twenty discriminatory bills toward the LGBTQ+ & 2S community have been brought forward during the legislative session. Only two have passed, both of them regarding transgender youth. The first bans trans girls K-12 from playing school sports, took effect in July of 2022. The other, which affects Asher, will become law in July of 2023. This law bans



physicians from providing gender-affirming healthcare for minors in the state of South Dakota.

In an interview with John Tsitrian from the South Dakota Standard, Elizabeth asked, “Do you know what it's like to be a transgender teen and hear lawmakers talk about you like you are a lesser person? How they use incorrect terms, triggering and outdated descriptions, and blatant fear mongering verbiage to describe your journey? As a parent, have you ever had to hold your crying child, because uninformed, discriminatory, sensationalist lawmakers talk about your child as if they are an abhorrent science experiment? Lawmakers have no right to interfere with the medical decisions a parent makes with their child's medical team. This bill is at its very core, unconstitutional.” Because of the new law, Asher's family has decided that they will make the four-hour trek to a physician in Minneapolis for his healthcare needs. That means sometimes either parent will miss work and their son will need to miss a day of school.

Each year where bills like this are introduced takes a toll on kids like Asher and their families. “I do really like Sioux Falls. I love South Dakota. This is where I grew up. I think it is a great place to raise kids, but it's really hard as a parent to continue living in a state that is actively trying to erase my child from existence,” Elizabeth says.

She continues, “But then, on the other hand, I think the more we educate, the more that we bring awareness...you don't want to flee because you feel like you're abandoning hope, you're giving up and things like that. But also, as a parent, it's my responsibility to take care of my child. And if I'm going to live

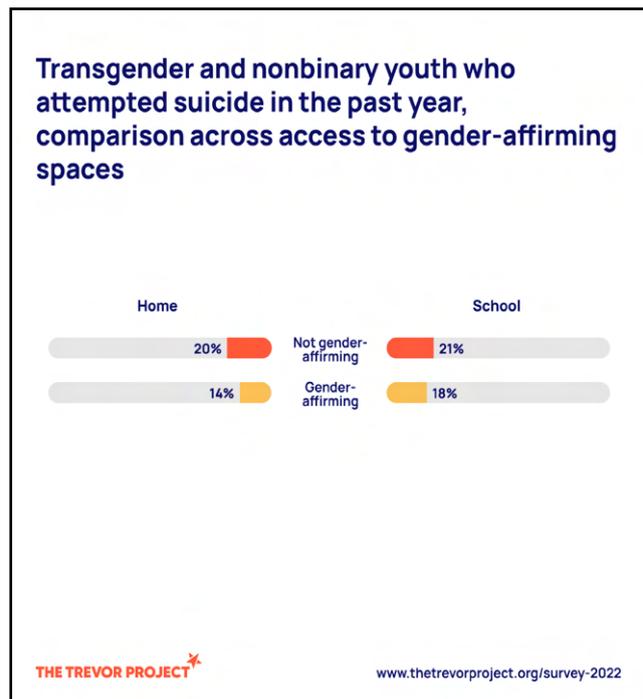
in a state that's trying to really harm him, why would we stay here?”

This internal battle that trans people and their affirming families have weighs heavily in a politically unfriendly state like South Dakota. They want to educate people about transgender people, but at what cost? Elizabeth reflects on how the constant battle can make her cynical.

“We're all just trying to make it through. Why have this division? Why focus on people's authenticity? You know? It really just baffles me. There are so many other things that we could be focused on, issues that we could look at, but we focus on this. “

Asher says, “We're as much human as everybody else. And we all just want to get through life and just have our place in the world. Us existing isn't hurting anybody. Just because I change my gender, it doesn't affect anybody else at all. Especially the legislators, people who probably haven't even met a single trans person in their life.”

Elizabeth adds, “They probably have [met



someone trans], and they don't even know it. They're just like any other person. You know? They're just trying to get their coffee. They're trying to make it to the next day. They're here to exist."

Even though Elizabeth and Brian didn't struggle with Asher being transgender, they recognize that some families have a more difficult time. Their advice is simple. Open your heart.

"If people want to know about trans people, I think you need to talk to one and just get to know them. Be open to knowing people you might not have normally talked to," Brian says. "I'm glad that we have safe places, especially in Sioux Falls, as far as being in South Dakota. But there's a lot of places where people can't openly speak about who they are, and that's a tragedy. It's heartbreaking."

Elizabeth adds, "I think so much of the hate that is spreading is because people just haven't taken the time to understand or even try to figure it out."

Because there is more awareness about trans people, there are also more resources that people shouldn't be afraid to use, including support groups for families.

"It's really awesome to be able to speak to people that are in different places with the journey. Some have had a transgender kid for a very long time, decades. And some are just finding out. And they're all over the religious and political spectrum," Brian says.

"... you're my baby, and it has nothing to do with gender."

When accepting and loving their transgender child, Elizabeth and Brian can't fathom a different way.

Talking about it, Brian is overcome with



emotion. "Well, I think the unfortunate thing is the alternative. Statistically, you know, if you don't accept..." He is referring to the reality that trans kids who don't have affirming loved ones face a much higher risk of suicide. This troubling statistic needs to be addressed.

Elizabeth says, "Coming from a mother's perspective, I carried my child... feeling their heart, feeling them kick. Love was never dependent upon their gender. They're my child. Why would it? I have a hard time understanding why people you know..." Elizabeth trails off for a second before continuing. "Like, no matter what, at the end of the day, you're my baby, and it has nothing to do with gender."

JACK

As a two-week camping vacation was wrapping up, Jack sat his kids down to reveal something major. He wasn't sure how it was going to go, and the whole trip he had been anxious about what he had to say. As a 37-year-old with a wife and children, he was about to reveal to his kids he is transgender.

“Transgender was not in anyone’s vocabulary.”

Jack grew up in Waubay, South Dakota, and by his own account had a pretty normal childhood. After Waubay, it was off to Brookings for college, eventually settling in Hartford, where he’s lived for the last 12 years.

As a kid, he struggled with his identity in the way others might. He had long, curly hair down to his waist that his mom refused to let him cut. Anytime he tried to dress more

to his personal taste, masculine, his mom would put a stop to it. Finally at age 18, right before graduation, he cut his hair really short and began his first steps in claiming his own identity.

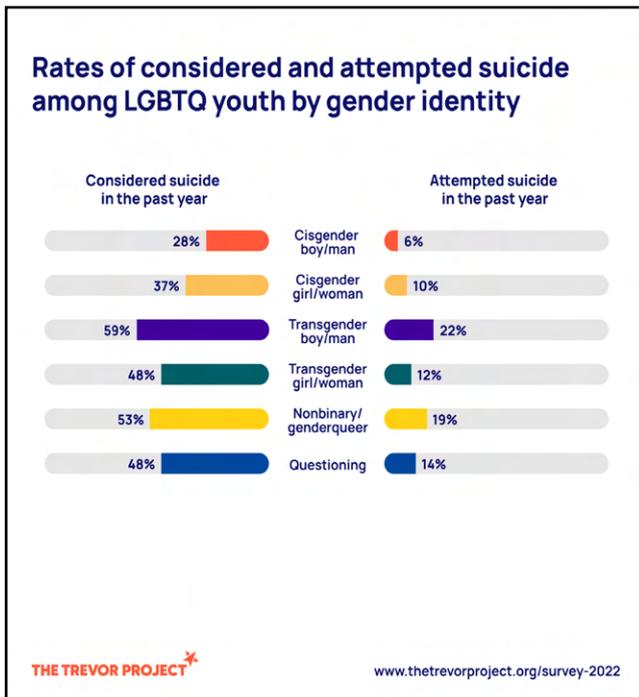


In the small town Jack grew up in, the word “transgender” was not in anyone’s vocabulary. And being any part of the LGBTQ community was never discussed in a positive way. Jack didn’t know that being transgender was even a possibility and so the struggles he faced with his identity were squashed down in an effort to do what he was “supposed” to do- find a man, get married, and have kids.

Relationships with men never felt right, but he tried. He ended up meeting a person at work that would end up changing the trajectory of his life in the most positive way.

“I met Sherry and everything just kind of fell into place for me. I felt comfortable with myself. I felt comfortable in my relationship for the first time, like everything felt good,” Jack says.

When his wife Sherry thinks back on that time, she has to laugh a little because she wasn’t labeling herself a lesbian, but here she was, attracted to a woman and realizing that she wanted to be with this person,



regardless of their sex or gender.

“When Jack and I first started dating, we did not identify ourselves as lesbian. We were just in love. Like, we didn't even think about it,” Sherry says. “You know, I just was like, I've got to be with this person.”

And so, they settled into a happy relationship with a blended family. Both she and Jack had kids from previous relationships, and things were swimming along.

During this time, Jack slowly started to change his appearance. Because he felt comfortable in his relationship and felt more confident in his overall happiness, he started feeling more confident to wear more masculine clothes and cut his hair a little shorter.

Still not realizing he was transgender, Jack boarded a plane to travel to a work conference about equality in the workplace, and that's where things snapped into sharp focus for him.

“I went to a workshop that was being led by a transgender person because I wanted to know how to better help trans employees at Citibank, not knowing that I was going



to leave there in tears with my whole world changed in that one workshop.” He continues, “Everything this trans man was saying was everything that I felt, and I didn't realize that I was transgender until that second, like that moment. I was like, that's me 100%.”

Sherry was on the work trip with Jack, but he kept his newfound knowledge from her because he wasn't quite sure what to do with it.

“I found a therapist when I came home and I was like, okay, I'm just going to be non-binary and I'll just use they/them pronouns. And I'll just live with that because that'll be easier for everybody in my life.” Jack didn't want to burden anyone, so he was anxious to make it easy for everyone around him.

“[At] my first therapy session, I walked in with the belief that I was confused [on what my identity was], and she's like, ‘Well, what do you want to be called?’ And I was like, ‘He/him!’” Jack laughs. “Within the first five minutes, she's like, ‘A: You're not confused. You just need to figure out how to voice that. Right?’”

After months of therapy, Jack was eventually able to tell Sherry.

“I wanted to spend my life with him regardless of what gender he was.”

“To be honest, at first I was kind of pissed off because he had lied to me,” Sherry says about when Jack came out to her. Even though Sherry had an idea that this was coming, (she had known Jack was most likely transgender before he did), she admits she was frustrated with him for not telling her.

“I knew it, and I just was waiting for it. He



was leaning very much for a long time...so it wasn't shocking to me," Sherry says. "Him coming out and just kind of freeing that burden, he was happier and obviously there were some struggles with coming out. But in our home, the people that lived with him are all very accepting. He was just happy."

Although Sherry was happy to see Jack being true to himself, she had some soul searching to do and what it meant for her own identity. Sherry had proudly been identifying as a lesbian, so what did this mean for her identity now that Jack was transitioning?

"I have come to realize I'm probably more pansexual, acknowledging that, yes, I'm in love with this person, not their genitalia, not their title, not their gender." Sherry laughs a little when she recounts, "Not that long ago

I even said, I was like, giving up my "lesbian title".

"I had my own battle. It did take me a little bit of time. I mean, for maybe a week or two I really had to do some digging. And ultimately, it came down to the fact that I didn't love him because of his gender," Sherry said. "I wanted to spend my life with him regardless of what gender he was."

Sherry found a therapist and also joined Facebook groups dedicated to the spouses of trans folks.

"I couldn't put the education of myself back on Jack. You know, Jack was going through his own struggles. So for me, it helped me to do a lot of research on my own, educate myself." But as Sherry was educating herself on what their life might be like moving forward, she couldn't deny that once Jack had made the decision to start living life on his terms, he was more confident and definitely happier.

The next step would be telling their loved ones.

"If this is actually who he is, then he should be true to that."

It was a hot summer day, and Jack and his family were taking advantage of the sunshine by swimming and playing in the pool in their backyard.

They are an active family, and if the weather is nice, Jack, his wife, and three children are going to be doing the typical Midwest things - camping, swimming, or being active outdoors. It was one of these frequent family camping trips where Jack would reveal to his kids that he is transgender.

Jack's 16-year-old child Jasmyn remembers that they were all hanging out, and Jack sat the family down. She could tell he was very

nervous and that made her and her brothers nervous. After Sherry and Jack told them he was transgender, Jasmyn admits she was shocked and a little bit confused. She didn't know what to think. But after letting that initial shock wear off, she knew that if transitioning was going to make Jack happy, then that's what she wanted for him.

"I worried, like, how much is this gonna change our family dynamic? But honestly, it was a pretty easy change for me, I guess," Jasmyn said. "I was just like, you know what, if this is actually who he is, then he should be true to that."

Eleven-year-old Max says he honestly didn't know what to think because he was

confused about what being transgender meant. But the day-to-day relationship with Jack never changed, just the pronouns and the name. They still played video games together and hung out.

Once Jack had told his kids, the next goal was going to be coming out to his family and everyone else.

"It's a very, very, very difficult situation for me."

Telling their families about Jack's transition was not easy.

Whereas Sherry's family was polite to Jack's face, Jack's family did not take it well.

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TRANSFORMATION PROJECT

Sharing the stories of transgender South Dakotans

“We told Sherry's family and then really my last step was telling my parents, and I put that off for months because I knew in my heart it was not going to go well,” Jack says. A trip to help care for his mom after her surgery really made it evident that Jack couldn't put off the talk any longer.

“I went there with my daughter to help. And so my daughter knew I was trans, but my mom didn't know, my brother didn't know. And I was around them for like three days. And I didn't realize the emotional and physical toll it was going to take on me to have them deadname me and misgender me for three days straight, which was no fault of their own. They didn't know,” Jack says. “I think I got home and just fell into my bed and cried for the rest of the night. I knew at that moment, I was like, I can never do that again. Like I don't ever want to go through that experience again.”

Jack made the decision to talk to his family before the holidays because he knew with all of the family gatherings, he wouldn't be able to handle an experience like that emotionally.

Knowing that an individual phone call to each of his family members would be emotionally devastating, Jack decided to text his parents and brothers separately. None of them took it well. Jack hasn't spoken to his dad since, and the few conversations he's had with his brothers have been strained. His mom only recently started speaking with him again.

“[It's] a very, very, very difficult situation for me,” Jack says of the relationship with his family. “Especially when there are things that you want to share with your family and you just can't, like they don't care. They don't want to talk to you. The holidays come up, and you can't go be with your family because

your parents don't want you there.”

Where the relationships with their families lack, their friends, or chosen family, have more than made up for the lack of support. Some may have had questions, but overwhelmingly they have supported Jack and Sherry.

Since they were already involved in the Sioux Falls Pride community (they helped start it), they had a diverse group of friends who were able to take it all in stride.

“I am his biggest ally.”

So now Jack and his family are navigating this world with the love and support of some, and not of others. But they all agree that if someone can look at their family and feel empowered to start living their true selves, it will be worth it.

Jasmyn says her friends and inner circle are all very accepting and affirming. She's felt safe with her employer being able to talk about her family and not feel judged or alienated. At the time Jack came out, Jasmyn was attending a religious private school, and she did not feel completely comfortable talking about her home life because she knew their stance on the LGBTQ community. That was difficult.

Max's friends may have had a few questions, but overall they just didn't care. Or they didn't know what it means to be trans. But Max's advice has always been “Just be supportive.”

Since Jack's transition, Jasmyn has felt comfortable being a resource of support for other trans kids or even helping educate people who don't know about trans and non-binary people.

In Sherry, Jack has a loving and fiercely protective partner.



“I am his biggest ally. I don't care who you are. If you misgender my husband, I will correct you in a heartbeat. And sometimes I think, even to a fault because at times it has annoyed Jack. But I feel like he deserves that respect.” She continues, “You know, I don't feel like a very loud, outspoken person, but in this I am. He's gone through the struggle long enough. He had to hide who he was. I just don't think he should be disrespected by others. And you know, a lot of times it's not intentional. Sometimes he is a little quiet or reserved about correcting others. So I don't mind doing that.”

“...it's different to live than to thrive.”

Jack has become very passionate about sharing his story in the hopes that it helps other people like him. Whether it's at his job as the Community Health Worker/

Community Outreach Manager with The Transformation Project, or even just being a resource in Facebook groups for trans people, he stresses that you can be transgender and have a happy and healthy life with a family and career.

“I think especially in South Dakota, young people need to see there's an [trans] adult that's actually living their life, being their true self, but they're happy, they're okay, they're thriving,” Jack says. “I think it's different to live than to thrive. Like everybody can live, but we need to see people that are thriving. I didn't have that, and I want other folks to be able to have that.”

Jack is glad to fill the role of visible trans male because he feels that if he had known of a trans male when he was younger, his journey might have been different.

“...we can't do better if we don't know better, right?”

Jack's wife and kids all echo each other in that there's no way to move past the stigma trans people face until people start asking questions.

Jasmyn says, “Because I feel like a lot of hate is built on ignorance, just ask questions.”

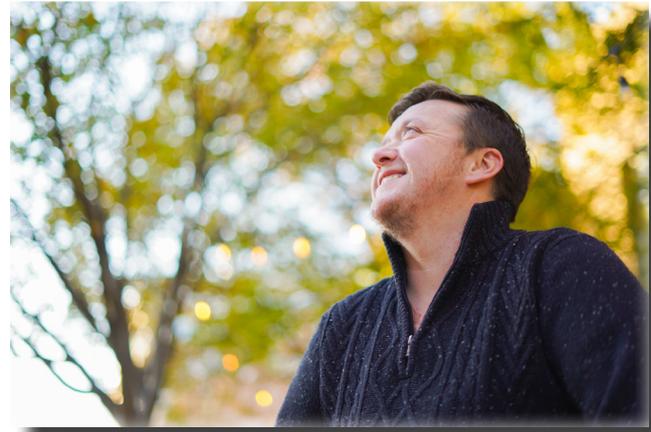
And for kids of trans parents, she wants you to know it's okay to feel worried or confused, but your parents won't be offended if you need to ask questions.

“I went from having two moms, and then I went to having a mom and a dad, so it was a big change, but it still wasn't really like there was much of a change to our dynamics. Because, like, he's still the same person. He's just like, actually being who he wants to be, you know?”

Sherry adds, “People just don't know somebody who's transgender or don't know someone who's gay or non-binary or whatever, and you have negative connotations about them and then you realize, oh, they're just like me. They take care of their family. They're just a person.”

Jack's advice to anyone facing the fear of being true to themselves is this: “Tell the folks in your life that are going to be supportive, that you know, 100% are going to be okay with it. Then when you tell the folks that are going to be tougher, you have all of those people behind you, to hold you up, when maybe those conversations don't go as well.”

And regarding the legislators around the country, including South Dakota, who perpetually try to pass anti-trans laws, Jack and his family just wish they would try to talk to the people these laws would affect.



“If we don't take the time to just have a conversation - sit down with a roomful of transgender kids, they'd probably be more than happy to hang out and have lunch and just have a conversation. Or with transgender adults and kids or whatever the case may be.” Jack says. “Just do some research and have some real conversations so that you understand better from somebody else's point of view. Like I don't know their point of view either, right? So that could probably be helpful for everybody.”

Jack also adds that it's okay to admit that you don't know everything about trans people and it's okay to change a negative opinion. “That means you're growing as a person, you're learning. We do that our whole life from the day we're born. We can't do better if we don't know better, right?”

Jack feels so fortunate that his immediate family has had his back since day one. They've always been willing to take care of him and deal with the unpleasant behavior of others.

“She [Sherry] dealt with all the backlash. She took that on herself and I didn't have to do any of it. My immediate family that lives in my house with me are like, so supportive. It's like ridiculous how much they have my back.”

NAVEN

“I mean, you just see the change.”

When asked how many exotic animals he has living in his bedroom, Naven won't divulge the number.

“I'll keep that to myself,” the eighteen-year-old says with the slightest smile. His dad Nathan is quick to add, “Way more than we are comfortable with!”

Naven has always been interested in bugs, and right now, he is particularly interested in spiders. He hopes to pursue a degree in biology and maybe work in some way with the misunderstood and often maligned animals. Being misunderstood and maligned is something Naven knows something about.

He is a person of few words and a calm presence, and he doesn't seem to be the type who will make grand displays of attention-grabbing behavior. So, it seems fitting that when Naven came out as transgender, it was quietly, without fanfare or many words.

Around age twelve, Naven learned about transgender and Two-Spirit people and instantly felt that he recognized that identity within himself.

“I guess it was kind of like an immediate thing for me when I found out what that was. Pretty much it was then that I started identifying as a guy on social media and stuff like that,” Naven says.

Naven quietly transitioned socially, online, and at school. Among his peers, he was Naven, the guy.

But some pretty significant people were left out of the loop. His family.

Naven didn't tell his family his feelings for several years. He says this wasn't out of spite or



anger. Maybe he just didn't have the words. Or perhaps he just wasn't ready to rock the boat. Although he didn't come right out and say he was trans, he wasn't exactly hiding anything either.

Nathan says, “For me, it's not like I didn't know. [Naven] didn't have to come out. I mean you just see the change.”

Nathan remembers Naven previously wearing pink and stereotypical girl clothes, and then there was an evolution to more masculine attire. Naven remembers it as just wearing what he was given and not putting up much of a fight.

But there came a time when Naven felt it was time to tell his parents that he wanted to be known as their son.

“And that's when it really hit me how much it meant to him for me to acknowledge him as a son.”

When a person is transgender and begins their transition, it can be a time of growth for the entire family. And this has been true for Naven's family.

Where he had known he was a transgender

person for several years, the news that he wanted to transition was more of a surprise to his parents.

“Naven has suggested that it was maybe closer to fourth or fifth grade [that he knew he was trans], and we probably didn’t realize it until the last maybe two or three years,” Angie says.

“I think the biggest change, and maybe even the hardest change, was that Naven wanted it all changed immediately for all of us. He/him, brother/son, should be happening now. And for so many years in our thought process, it was our daughter and her brothers. It’s been a little bit hard to transition to that as quickly as Naven would like.”

For Naven’s dad Nathan, using he/him pronouns for Naven has been a bit more

complicated. He feels blindsided by Naven’s transition and admits that he was defensive when he got hated on for not jumping on the pronoun switch right away.

“For me, I didn’t know anything about Naven transitioning or anything until he was going to some therapy. And I found out the therapist doesn’t like me because I’m the bad guy. Because I guess I wasn’t calling [Naven] ‘him.’ I didn’t even understand it or know what was going on, that this was happening, so then I became defensive after that.”

Nathan continues, “I’m accepting of it. I don’t judge nobody. That’s what he chooses. But I still was calling him “her” because that is who I know [Naven] as. When [Naven] was born, it was my daughter.”

The feelings and thoughts Naven and his



family are experiencing aren't unique to his family. Many families struggle when the person they always felt they knew now asks to be recognized differently. But trans people want their loved ones to know that they are still the same person, just trying to be truer to themselves.

Angie and Nathan both say they were overall accepting of Naven, but they just needed time to get used to the pronouns. In addition, they weren't comfortable with Naven starting any hormone therapy until he was eighteen.

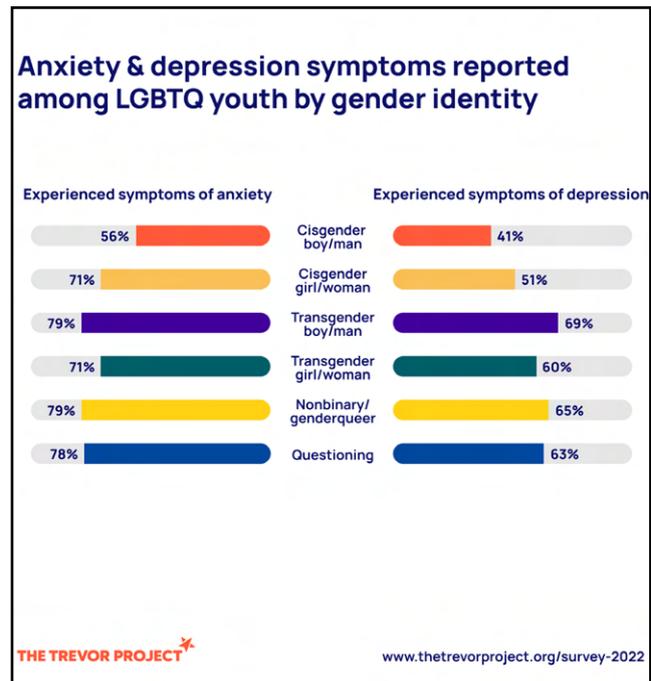
“Naven wanted to take a lot of what I would call more permanent steps that I wasn't comfortable with. Like taking hormones or having those types of things that I felt like that should be a decision for Naven when he was old enough to make it on his own,” Angie says. “I didn't feel comfortable with him as a teenager to make those physical changes. That had to be a decision for when Naven was an adult.”

The slow pace of the journey was frustrating to Naven because he wanted an immediate switch. Angie says Naven had trouble accepting that this was a difficult change for his parents.

“It wasn't gonna be an immediate change for us that we could just flip a switch, and everything was going to be the way Naven wanted us to see it.”

She goes on to say that, yes, it can be challenging, but the important thing is to be supportive and there for your loved one. “It might be a slower journey, but just be willing to be on that journey.”

Nathan adds, “I'm not being hateful by it [referencing misgendering Naven]. It wasn't out of spite or nothing like that. When it really slapped me in the face was when we





had a conversation about it, and he wanted me to accept him as a boy. And that's when it really hit me how much it meant to him for me to acknowledge him as a son."

Something as simple as respecting someone's pronouns can significantly impact the mental health of a transgender person. Because pronouns are so intertwined with one's sense of identity, it makes sense that transgender and nonbinary youth who have their pronouns respected by the people in their life attempt suicide at half the rate of those who do not have their pronouns respected.

Angie worries that Naven will face discrimination and unaccepting people in his life. Although society is becoming more aware of trans and Two-Spirit people,

she knows it will be a hard road for him. Although people that are close to the family are mostly accepting, albeit a little confused, there are people within their extended family who don't recognize Naven for who he is.

"They think all this is a phase, or Naven is confused. I don't know if we can change how they feel," Angie says.

"I guess I'm worried more for Naven and worried about society's reaction and family members' reaction outside of our family. I worry if things are gonna go the way that Naven hopes. I think that was my biggest worry. That the acceptance isn't going to be 100% for everybody that Naven encounters in life."

Angie wants people to treat her kid equally, just as any loving parent would like for their child.

"I think the biggest thing is that boy or girl; it doesn't matter. They're your child. The fear that they're going to be retaliated against or going to be singled out or, you know, face segregation of some sort because of this. That's the part that I would hope someone in the [South Dakota] legislature would realize."

"I don't think he realized there were so many people who are Two-Spirit or LGBT"

This past June, during Sioux Falls Pride, Naven and his dad served frybread together at the inaugural Two-Spirit Wacipi. Although they didn't talk about it in depth, Naven feels that this experience opened his dad's eyes a little more to the amount of Two-Spirit people in the local Native American community. And he thinks his dad was a

little surprised at the number of people he knew that came to the event, perhaps people he didn't think would be supportive.

“I don't think he realized there were so many people who are Two-Spirit or LGBT or are supporters within the Native American community, especially those within his social circle.”

Their time together at the Two-Spirit Wacipi helped Naven know that, despite their past, his dad does love him and wants to support him.

Naven says he doesn't like to look to the future, but more recently, he's been looking

to the past.

He is connecting with his own Lakota culture and learning more about the history of Two-Spirit people in Native American history before colonization. He acknowledges that he is not close with his extended family, but reading about the Two-Spirit people who came before him has helped him feel connected to his Native American heritage.

“Learning and reading about how LGBT people were treated in the past within Lakota culture allowed me to appreciate and respect my heritage more,” Naven says.



93% of transgender and nonbinary youth said that they have worried about transgender people being denied access to gender-affirming medical care due to state or local laws.*



91% of transgender and nonbinary youth said that they have worried about transgender people being denied access to the bathroom due to state or local laws.*



83% of transgender and nonbinary youth said that they have worried about transgender people being denied the ability to play sports due to state or local laws.*

*www.TheTrevorProject.org/survey-2022/

PERCI

“I either look like I walked out of a Farmer’s Market or out of Hot Topic. That’s my personality.”

It’s not lost on Perci that when people hear the word “nonbinary,” they envision a stereotype.

“They think slightly masculine, androgynous, skinny, white guy,” Perci laughs. “I have a little chub. I like my skirts. I like my bright red curly hair and cute bandana and cottage core look. I’m still a ‘them.’”

Perci understands that people have difficulty thinking outside of the gender binary because it’s been ingrained in society. They find it very important to educate people that there are some individuals who don’t identify as male or female, but they are also not a third gender.

“It bugs me that nonbinary has become its own gender category. It’s like boy, girl, non-binary. We’re not making this a ‘tri-nary,’” Perci laughs again. “I’m not a third gender. I’m outside of it. Why can’t I be myself?”

It took a few years for Perci to pinpoint and recognize that they are a nonbinary person, especially when the world tries so hard to put things in a box- male or female, one or the other. Until they were about ten, Perci really never gave much thought to their gender.

Perci’s mom, Di, recalls, “Sometimes they were very, very girly girl. Then tomboy. Yeah, it was like all over the place. We [enjoyed] dressing up and having a girls’ day at the mall. And then Perci would be in the garage building a motorcycle, you know?”

Perci presented as predominately feminine until about age ten or eleven, and even though they didn’t always feel particularly like a girl



in middle school, they felt they needed to suppress themselves because they were aware that they didn’t fit in the “norm.” At first, Perci thought they were gay, but after they learned more about the different ways people experience gender, they realized being gay was only part of what they were experiencing.

“I hated my periods before I even knew what gender dysphoria was. To be able to find that information and find those community supports [online] and to be able to talk about that, it just clicked.”

Finally feeling empowered enough to embrace their identity, Perci initially took on their middle name to go by because it was more neutral than their deadname. They also cut their hair and started dressing more masculinely.

“...conform or else people won’t accept you.”

Everyone, cisgender or not, faces external pressure on how to dress or look at some point in their life. In the early days of Perci embracing their nonbinary identity, they faced internal conflict about how to express themselves with their outward appearance best.

The belief of some in the cisgender and trans community is that to be accepted, you need to dress a certain way and even behave and take up space a certain way. The burden to “be accepted” can be tough on the nonbinary community.

Aside from the enormous amount of pressure transgender people face to look or act within the stereotypes of their gender, non-binary people can often face this pressure two-fold. Not only do they get pressure from those outside of the trans community, but they can also receive it from those within the community.

“[At the time] the online internet culture was saying ‘conform,’ or else people won’t accept you. There was a lot of that I had to work through and deconstruct,” Perci says.

The decision to go against gender stereotypes can carry a heavy price. By not conforming, transgender people are more likely to be discriminated against, face violence, and experience harassment. But the truth is people can choose to adhere to gender norms or not, and both decisions are valid and do not take away from one’s legitimacy in being nonbinary or transgender.

“You were very, very male [presenting], and every once in a while, you would want to wear a dress or something. You would come downstairs and look at me and say, ‘Just

because I look femme, I’m still a ‘them,’” Di says.

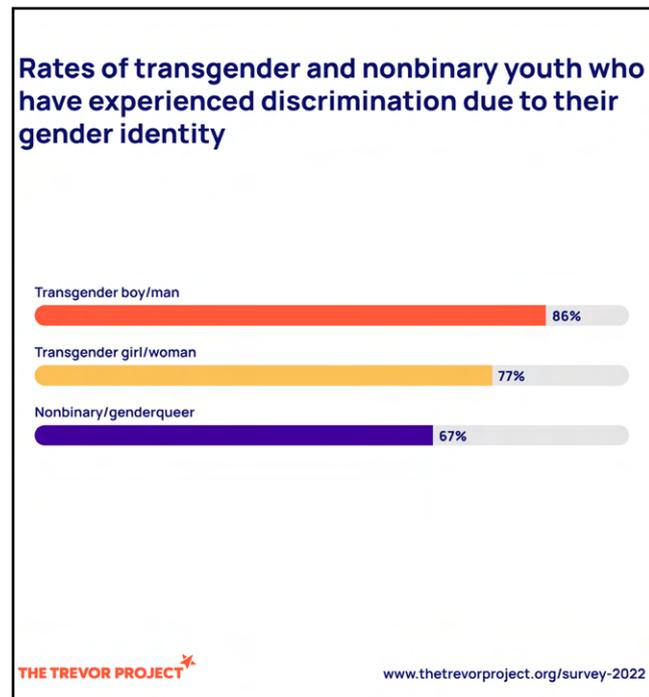
They both laugh at this, but the reality is that Perci hopes to bust the misconception that nonbinary people need to look or act a certain way to “qualify” as nonbinary.

“I am who I am. I am not restricted by society’s idea of gender and what it should be, can be, or cannot be,” Perci says.

“... she didn’t know what the hell I was talking about”

Navigating the world as a nonbinary person comes with a multitude of hurdles that even other trans people don’t necessarily face. Generally, society accepts the idea of male or female, but it takes some effort to understand the experience of a person outside of the traditional binary.

Perci faced many puzzled looks and misunderstandings when they first came out as nonbinary. Even though there were three other trans people in their grade at their school at the time, Perci was the only nonbinary person.



When Perci told their best friend Zoe, she embraced Perci's identity, but it did confuse her.

"She was accepting, but she didn't know what the hell I was talking about. Like, it was a learning curve, but she was also very supportive," Perci says.

When it came to other friends, some may have been accepting, even if their families were not. In some instances, they wouldn't even talk to Perci.

The fear of misconceptions or hostile reactions often has a chance to rear their heads because Perci and Di find that you just don't know how people will react.

"Everywhere we went, it was like, okay, are we going to get flak from this person?" Di says. The constant worry in the back of their minds is nerve-wracking, so they both agree

that it's essential that education is at the forefront to help dissipate myths and fears.

According to the Trevor Project, an LGBTQ advocacy group, having at least one accepting adult can reduce the risk of a suicide attempt among LGBTQ young people by about 40 percent.

But with that being said, the hundreds of bills currently being proposed in state legislatures across the country is wreaking havoc on the mental health of transgender people, regardless of the support in their life. Even when the bills don't pass, they still signal that trans people are something to be legislated, not someone to care for and love.

In the 2022 Trevor Project National Survey of LGBTQ Youth's Mental Health, 39% of the South Dakota youth questioned said that recent politics negatively impacted



their well-being. And 48% of youth said it sometimes affected their mental health. This 87% means that kids in South Dakota suffer because their existence is politicized.

Statistics like this drive Perci and Di to help trans kids here in South Dakota.

Even Perci, who has incredible support from their family, and the support of several organizations and a community of loving people, still feels crushed by the proponents of discriminatory bills that peddle hatred and misinformation.

Because Perci battles severe gender dysphoria, the passing of HB1080 in South Dakota has been detrimental to their health. In addition, Perci is autistic, which can carry its own unique stressors.

People who are autistic and battle gender dysphoria often face compounded mental health struggles. This can prove disastrous

when they do not have access to the gender-affirming care they need.

Perci's story is just one of many similar stories across South Dakota.

“I love my child. Period. I love them because of who they are.”

In the eyes of Perci and Di, every uncomfortable experience and negative interaction with others is an opportunity for education and an opening for dialogue about trans kids. They feel that through education people will realize there is nothing to fear.

Both are actively involved in several LGBTQ advocacy groups and are doing what they can to support LGBTQ people, particularly the trans community. Perci works with an organization called B4CK (Binders for Confident Kids) which provides free binders



to people who can't afford them. They are also a director for South Dakota Youth Activism.

"Perci has done so much good," Di beams. "They don't like to, you know, toot their own horn."

Di is not afraid to defend her child, or any trans child, from the world's aggressors. She is regularly in contact with elected officials and constantly advocates for trans people. She has even offered to buy coffee and discuss anti-trans legislation with some of the South Dakota legislature's most anti-trans members. She's still waiting for any of them to take her up her offer. Her advocacy for Perci led her to her current role on the education committee of The Transformation Project. She was recently elected vice president of the Black Hills Center for Equality.

"My mom basically was and is there for me through it all - though I was frustrated in the beginning because she didn't understand everything, I know that she tried her best and has grown into an amazing ally," Perci says of their mom. "I couldn't imagine what it would be like without her being accepting. I've met other trans kids who are so hurt by parents that don't accept them. How can a parent do that to their child?"

Di's hope is that every parent or caregiver of a trans kid can embrace their inner "mama bear" and be an ally for their child. She suggests that you respectfully ask questions if you're struggling to understand.

"Your child will answer them if they are asked sincerely. Accept who they are. If they were able to tell you, then give them the respect to listen," Di says. "Remember, this

Transgender and nonbinary youth who identified home or school as a gender-affirming space



THE TREVOR PROJECT

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is about them, not you! Don't be afraid to reach out to organizations and people who can support you."

When you first meet Di and Perci you can tell they are tight. They are so close they seem to finish each other's sentences. This bond makes it easy to see Di's pure love for her child.

"One thing I always stress to people is do not say things like, 'I love you no matter what,' or 'I love you even though,' and 'I love you, but.' These statements all imply that there is something wrong with them," says Di. "I love my child. Period. I love them because of who they are."

When Di talks about how she envisions Perci's future, she says, "I see Perci making a difference. I see that already in the work they are doing, in the volunteer activism, and in the fire and spirit with which they fight discrimination against transgender youth. They will continue fighting and working towards equal rights for all."

WILLOW

Since about the age of two, Willow would play dress-up at home, wearing a princess dress with a hooded sweatshirt on her head, flowing down her back to simulate long hair. Willow had always expressed herself in a feminine way, so it came as no surprise to her mom Carrie when, at age 11, Willow told her she wanted to wear dresses and use female pronouns at school.

Although Willow’s true self had never been a question in her family, Carrie knew that this might come as a shock to others who knew her outside of their home.

So with a few quick meetings with school staff and the guidance counselor to prepare them and ensure Willow’s safety and happiness, Willow came to school the next day, wearing a dress and courageously showing herself to the world. And she never looked back.

For the most part, Willow’s social transition has been a seamless one. Her teachers and the school administration have been affirming



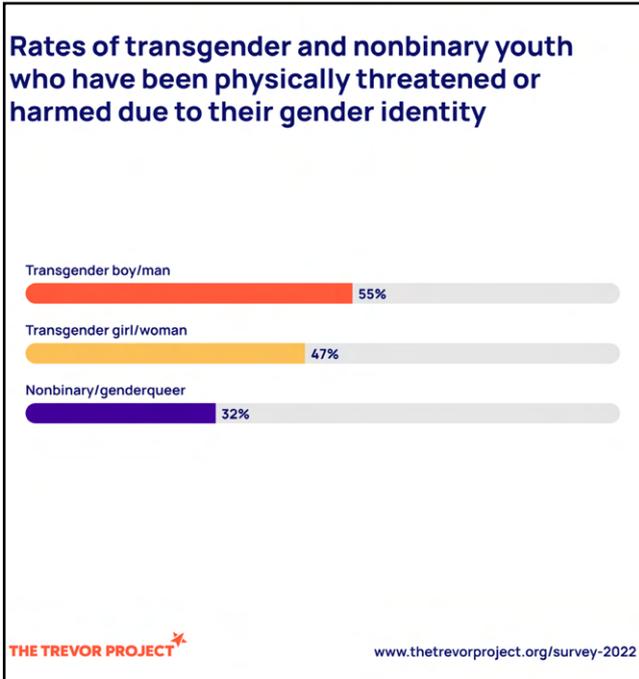
and have worked to provide a welcoming environment. Occasional purposeful misgendering by other students happened, but that was addressed and taken care of.

For many trans people, there is a “before” and “after” transition, so to speak, but because there was never a battle of forcing Willow into a gender she didn’t want to be, she had been free to just be!

“I’ve always said that if Willow has the courage to be who she is, all I have to do is be her mom.”

“I think, for the most part, everything that she already enjoyed doing, she enjoyed a little more,” Carrie says. Things that Willow may have hidden or pretended not to be interested in because of the fear of the backlash, she wasn’t hiding anymore. “Everything was just a little more enjoyable because it was very free,” Carrie says.

Carrie says there wasn’t an internal battle of acceptance about Willow coming out, but there was definitely some fear. “I had very little experience in terms of I didn’t know anyone else that was transgender,” Carrie



says. “So it was a completely new experience for me. And yeah, I think that was the scariest thing- not really knowing.”

Carrie decided to let Willow take the lead and communicate how comfortable she was going to be in certain situations.

“Whatever feels comfortable for Willow, and I feel like it's safe, then, you know, then that's what we do.”

Carrie also did a lot of reading to educate herself on how to be the best advocate for Willow. Her thorough research inspired her to pursue her doctorate in educational leadership at the University of Sioux Falls. She hopes to use her expertise to help care providers support transgender individuals in the area of mental health.

“I've always said that if Willow has the courage to be who she is, all I have to do is

be her mom, you know. And being Willow's mom is no different than being any of my other kids' mom. Each has uniqueness and differences.”

Willow has a very supportive group of friends, and their hometown just across the border in Minnesota has been welcoming as well.

The parents of Willow's classmates have reached out to Carrie privately to let her know that they support Willow, which blew Carrie away.

“I've received a lot of private messages from people. In fact, I got a text message once and it said, ‘We just found out about Willow. And I want you to know that there's a large group of moms and dads who are super supportive, and we just want you guys to know if there's ever anything you need, please reach out.’” Carrie was amazed at the





kindness of this stranger.

“I don't even know who this person was. I get some of those from time to time and that's very nice.”

“...the challenges are the same. We're just like any other family.”

Although Willow's transition has been relatively smooth, it hasn't been without its fair share of obstacles. Carrie lost a few good friends, and their family decided to leave their church because of the church's stance on gender identity. They also struggled to find a gender-affirming health care provider.

They eventually were able to get an appointment at Children's Minnesota in Minneapolis where they had a great experience at the gender health clinic for trans kids.

“It was kind of an all-encompassing visit. We met with a health care provider and a social worker,” Carrie continues. “They connected us with therapists; it was wonderful. But that's Minneapolis and it's one thing to go up once a year for a checkup. It's another thing if we're talking about routine visits.” The reality is that many families are not able to access transgender healthcare because the distance and cost to travel is just too great, there are so few physicians who provide transgender

healthcare and sometimes months-long wait times to see a provider, and some insurances do not cover affirming care.

Willow and Carrie were eventually able to find a gender-affirming healthcare provider in the SD town where Carrie works and Willow now attends school, but that will soon change due to a new law banning transgender healthcare for minors in the state of SD. Carrie admits that even though they come to SD for work and school, they really don't have much of a desire to move across the border into South Dakota. They had briefly considered moving after Willow's older brother graduates, but the continuous hostility toward trans people from the SD State Legislature has them reconsidering, especially since they now will have to seek transgender healthcare in their home state of Minnesota.

“You know, it's not fair to create laws that dictate who a person can be - it's as simple as that. And yeah, I think in Minnesota, we are fortunate [because of the laws and protections].”

“Other than the gender-affirming things we may be faced with at school, the challenges are the same. We're just like any other family,” Carrie says.

Carrie believes that with more education, people will realize their fears are unfounded.

“I don't know that most people, in general, are afraid of transgender people. I think they're afraid of what they don't know and don't understand. And it's as simple as that. And if they did know, and they did understand it, then it would be like, ‘Wow, that isn't so bad!’”

“... And I just think that's a wonderful part of Willow.”

When Willow isn't hanging out with friends or playing Roblox, she likes playing with her dog and swimming. She has kind eyes and a friendly smile. Her mom describes her as "wise beyond her years."

"She's certainly smarter and more in tune with herself than I was. Even as a cisgender person I don't think I knew much about myself at twelve years old. But then again, I didn't have to think about it."

Carrie also admires how Willow will go out of her way to compliment a person.

"If we're out and about, she'll compliment people. She will always say she loves your hair or you are so pretty," Carrie says. "It just takes people aback and they'll smile." Willow smiles, almost shyly, as her mom says this about her. "I've just never known somebody who – it's a very intentional part of who she is. And I just think that's a wonderful part of Willow."

"It's not necessarily a journey I ever anticipated being on as a parent."

A willow tree is beautiful and agile, known for its ability to survive and even thrive in hostile environments. So the name Willow fits this beautiful child who will flourish, regardless of what the world presents her with.

Carrie, like any loving parent, hopes that Willow's future is full of happiness. But she's also looking to the future with the watchful eye of a protective mother.

"Right now she's twelve, so she's still kind of under my wing. But when I have to start letting her go a little bit more, maybe those high school years, and I can't be there to protect quite as much. That makes me scared."

Carrie's advice to anyone starting this journey or struggling to adjust is first be kind, patient, and forgiving with yourself.

"There have been times I still mess up, and she's forgiving of me. So I need to just be forgiving of myself too," Carrie says.

Carrie's second bit of advice: You are your child's greatest advocate.

"Just be confident in that role and in your ability to do that. Sometimes people just don't know when to speak up."

And the third piece of advice from Carrie is to let your child guide you as much as possible because they really do know who they are.

"I keep telling people that even though we always knew Willow was Willow, the fact is, it's not necessarily a journey I ever anticipated being on as a parent. But we're finding blessings along the way. And that's the most important part, I think."



REMEMBERING ACEY D. MORRISON

by Mark Daniels



*Mitakuyepi,
Iyuha
chantewasteya
napechiyuzapi,
lakol micaze kin
Chinca Ahokila
emaciyapelo.
(Greetings
Relatives, I greet
each of you with
a good heart and
a handshake.*

My name is Chinca Ahokila or He who Honors and Cherishes his Children).

With profound gratitude and riveting grief, I write this Memorial for Acey D. Morrison and share selected parts of her obituary. I sit here in the smudge of the plant medicines, sage and sweetgrass, surrounded by the spirit of the buffalo and the Mnisose (Missouri River), far from the sacred He Sapa (Black Hills) and Pine Ridge Reservation where Acey lived her life. Although I never had the privilege of meeting Acey face to face, I sense that we are spirit relatives that have known each other for a long time. I was privileged to sit with Acey's mother, Edelyn "Sis" Catches, for a couple of hours and laugh and marvel at her wonderful memories of Acey. I, too, cried and absorbed the unspeakable grief that only a parent can feel at the loss of their child. Although this conversation was on the phone, it had the intimacy of two old friends sitting around a campfire.

Before sharing more about Acey, it is

important to mention that the intersection between being a Native American person, in this case an Oglala Lakota, and being a Two Spirit/Trans person is remarkable and dangerous. Remarkably, in traditional Native American cultures, our Two-Spirit relatives were deeply honored and respected. They were not told that they were wrong to be their authentic selves. They were not ostracized and disowned like our mainstream or colonial culture often has done. They were seen and understood to be a great and sacred blessing to their family, community, and tribe. This extraordinary combination of gender identity and sacred spiritual identity was revered. Two-Spirit people had important roles such as mediators and decision-makers, medicine people, warriors, peacemakers, teachers, name-givers, caretakers of children, visionaries, and heyokas (sacred clowns) in their tribes. Two-spirit is also the current term to recognize these gifted people and help us step beyond the colonization that resulted in the loss of Two Spirit knowledge and the accompanying transphobia, homophobia, and discrimination.

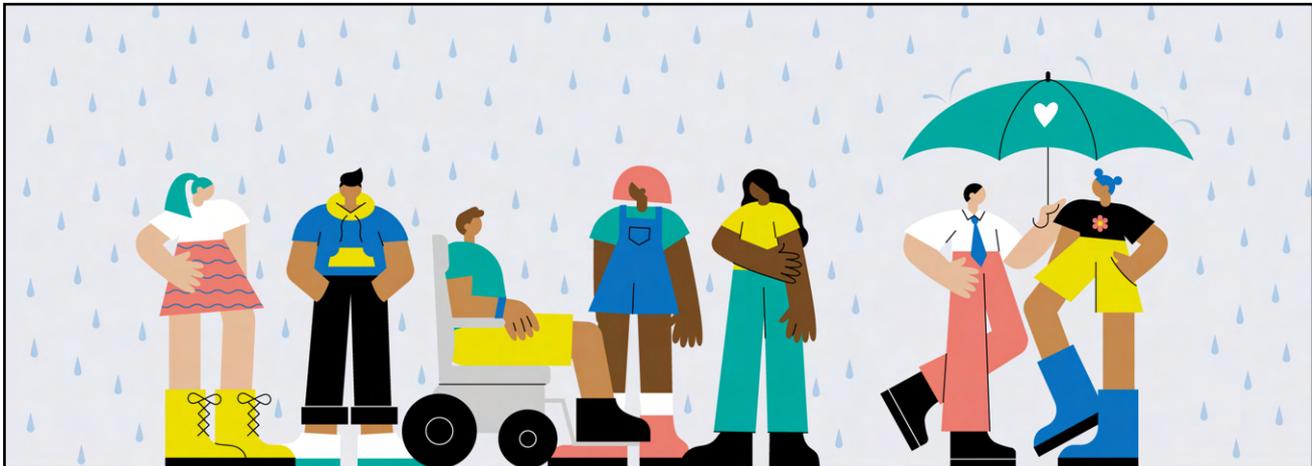
But being two-spirit and Native is also dangerous. Two-Spirit women and other trans women of color suffer the highest rates of murder and death in the U.S. Native American Two Spirit/Trans people are over twice as likely to experience a physical attack compared to U.S. Trans people in general. Acey is now counted among her other Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Relatives. And similar to other

transgender and gender-diverse people and other Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Relatives, the mainstream culture quickly forgets and erases them. A death of this nature not only viciously drowns out the vibrant life of the person who is killed but also comes as a tidal wave of grief and fear to the family, friends, community, and the larger Two Spirit, Trans, and Native communities.

In our conversation, Ina (mother) Edelyn warmly shared that every day was special with Acey. She said that they would be driving somewhere and break out laughing. She also noted that Acey had a big, big chante (heart) and would always reach out and help someone in need. She said she first realized Acey was a Two-Spirit person when she was just a baby. Acey's Unci (grandma) also noticed and warned Acey's Ina to prepare for it. Sure enough,

the kids teased and bullied her and made her life difficult. Still, Ina Edelyn would laugh and tell stories about Acey and how difficult it was for her to do the "boy" chores and things that were expected of her when some didn't understand or recognize her Two-Spirit identity. They wanted her to do "normal" boy things. Ina Edelyn giggled as she told me about Acey trying to drive the pick-up truck out on the farm when she was young. Apparently, she pulled it out of gear and somehow smashed her grandpa's hand. Another time, when she was 14 or so, she went out hunting with the other men and boys. The only thing she got a shot at was the side of the old courthouse. And then there was that time she was trying to learn how to ride a motorcycle and couldn't figure out the clutch. She kept going in circles and circles and circles.

On the other hand, there were things she



71% of transgender and nonbinary youth reported that they have experienced discrimination based on their gender identity.*

*www.TheTrevorProject.org/survey-2022/

enjoyed and at which she excelled. She loved to read and write and thrived in these areas. She fancied sewing, cooking, and cleaning as well. Her mother said she was very family-oriented and often cared for her younger siblings when needed.

Ina Edelyn was tremendously proud of Acey and indicated that her daughter was incredibly goal oriented. She was also a responsible person and a dedicated employee. Her maternal instincts were so keen that she adopted her baby nephew when he was just a few months old and raised him as her own until her death. He had spent his first few months in an abusive and neglectful household. Acey took him from that challenging environment and raised him with her warm and loving care. This little one was over a year old when Acey was killed, and he deeply misses his Mama. Unci Edelyn now raises him. She shared that they have a photograph of Acey, and Unci tells the little one, "Here's Mama Acey. She's so proud of you!" He looks up with a big grin on his face. Unci wants him always to know his Mama Acey.

The grief has been so utterly profound for Edelyn that she has slept at Acey's graveside. She has been hospitalized and lost her job. Somehow, amongst this indescribable pain, Ina Edelyn has been gifted with sacred spiritual experiences as she's pleaded with the Creator for understanding. Through her sacred Lakota ceremonies, she has been able to feel Acey's presence and hear her voice...." Oh, Mom, I love you."

Obituary

Acey D. Morrison was born on July 14, 1992, in Pine Ridge, SD, to Edelyn Catches and Lincoln Joseph Cross Dog Jr. Acey made her journey to the Spirit World on August 21, 2022, in Rapid City, SD.

Acey was what we call our two-spirit relative. Those who held her in their hearts could see her in her wholeness. She was a kindhearted, down-to-earth, joyous, respectful, and loving soul. She was a helpful and giving person who was always there for her family and friends. Acey always put a smile on others and had those around her laughing and happy. She always had her natural ways of being there for those she loved. She used laughter as medicine and chose self-love to heal wounds. She was the one to open her home up to you, give you her lasts, then inspire you to keep going, "this too shall pass."

We will remember her as who she was to each of us: authentic and unapologetic. As the one who strived to succeed, she set goals and reached them, then set another. Her achievements were guided by her work ethic and her openness to learn. She navigated this life through her big dreamer eyes and was always headed for the brighter days, so we will remember her as who she was on her most brilliant days. We wish her healing and that our love be part of her journey to the other side.



LAKOTA MOURNING SONG

*Mitacola, tokiya ilale, tokiya ilale,
Nitakuye kin ocicile pelo (heyo)*

*Ceya wau we, Ceya wau we, Otehikelo
(heyo)*

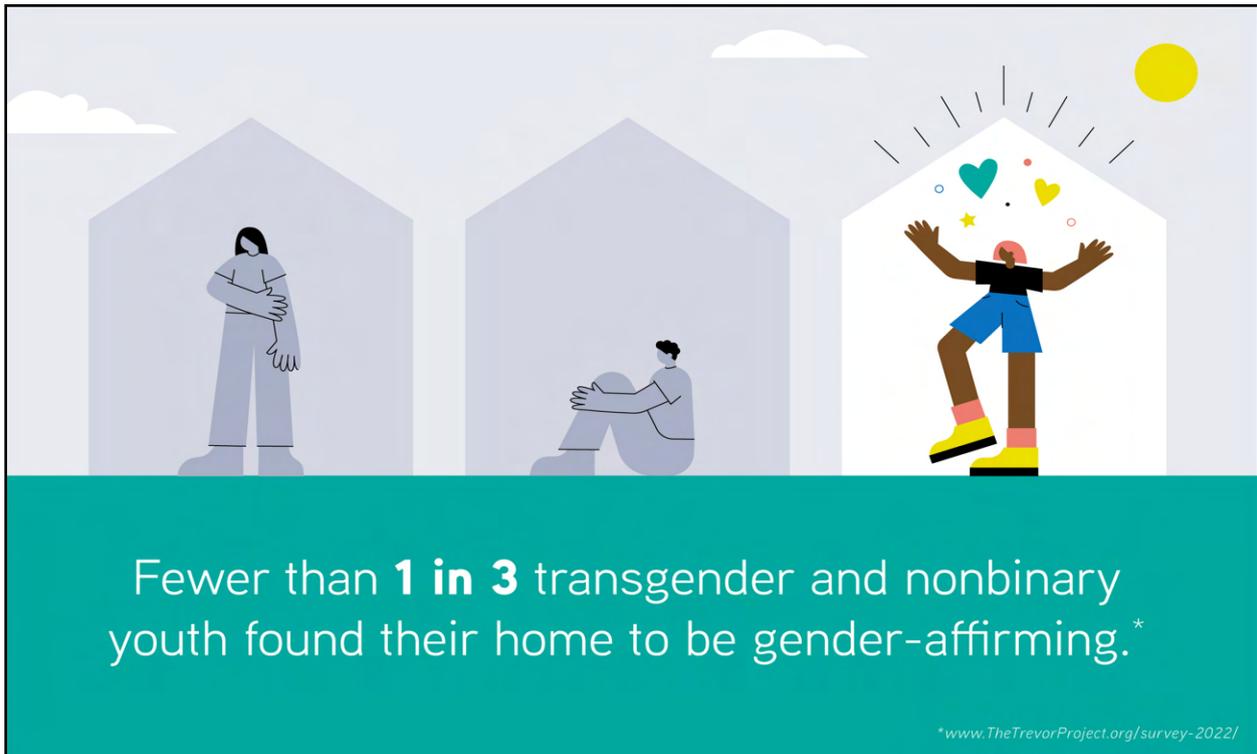
My friend, where did you go? Where
did you go? Your relatives are looking
for you.

I come crying, I come crying. This is a
really difficult time.

Mitakuye Oyasin

(All my Relations or We're all Related)

“A 30-year-old Native American trans woman was killed after meeting up with a man from a dating app, her family says. Almost six months later, no one has been arrested. Family and friends of Acey Morrison say she took care of everyone around her, but they fear they won't get accountability in her death. Morrison was fatally shot in the Rapid City mobile home on Aug. 21, making her the 30th trans person to die violently in 2022. By the end of the calendar year, that total would increase to 38 – among the highest numbers on record since the Human Rights Campaign first began tracking violence against trans Americans in 2016. At least 29 of them were trans women of color.” - Nico Lang, *Buzzfeed News Reporter*





2022 National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health South Dakota

The Trevor Project, the leading suicide prevention organization for LGBTQ young people, produces innovative original research that amplifies the experiences of diverse LGBTQ young people and brings new knowledge and clinical implications to the suicide prevention field.

Since 2019, our annual national surveys have been among the largest and most diverse surveys of LGBTQ young people in the U.S. For the first time ever, we're publishing the findings of our national survey, which captured the experiences of nearly 34,000 LGBTQ people ages 13-24 across the United States in 2022, segmented by all 50 states.

These data provide critical insights into the suicide risk faced by LGBTQ young people, top barriers to mental health care, the prevalence of anti-LGBTQ victimization, and the negative impacts of recent politics. Importantly, this research also points to ways in which we can all support the LGBTQ young people in our lives by detailing per state LGBTQ young people's access to accepting communities, LGBTQ-affirming spaces, and social support among family and friends — protective factors that are consistently associated with better mental health and lower suicide risk.

It's essential to emphasize that because we still do not have known counts or registries of the LGBTQ youth population comprehensive data on the mental health and well-being of LGBTQ youth remains limited. These findings strive to underscore the unique challenges faced by young LGBTQ people, a group consistently found to be at significantly increased risk for suicide because of how they are mistreated and stigmatized in society.

We hope that LGBTQ young people in every state will see themselves reflected in these experiences that so many have bravely shared; and that these data will equip fellow researchers, policymakers, and other youth-serving organizations in every state with the data necessary to celebrate and uplift LGBTQ young people and advocate for policies that work to end the public health crisis of suicide.

Mental Health & Suicide Risk in South Dakota

LGBTQ young people are not inherently prone to suicide risk because of their sexual orientation or gender identity, but rather placed at higher risk because of how they are mistreated and stigmatized in society.



Suicide Risk

53% of LGBTQ youth in South Dakota seriously considered suicide in the past year.

19% of LGBTQ youth in South Dakota attempted suicide in the past year.

Anxiety & Depression

75% of LGBTQ youth in South Dakota reported experiencing symptoms of anxiety.

58% of LGBTQ youth in South Dakota reported experiencing symptoms of depression.

Access to Mental Health Care Among LGBTQ Youth in South Dakota



Access to care

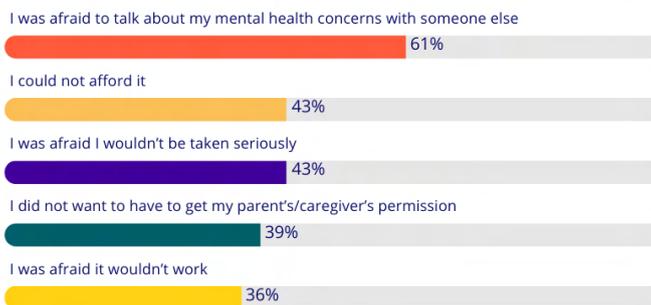
59% of LGBTQ youth in South Dakota who wanted mental health care in the past year were not able to get it.

Access to mental health care among LGBTQ youth

- Wanted but did not receive care 59%
- Wanted and received care 41%



LGBTQ youth who wanted mental health care but were unable to get it cited the following top five reasons:



Challenges Faced By LGBTQ Youth in South Dakota

Research consistently finds that LGBTQ youth who have experienced anti-LGBTQ victimization — including being physically threatened or harmed, discriminated against, or subjected to conversion therapy — report significantly higher rates of attempting suicide.

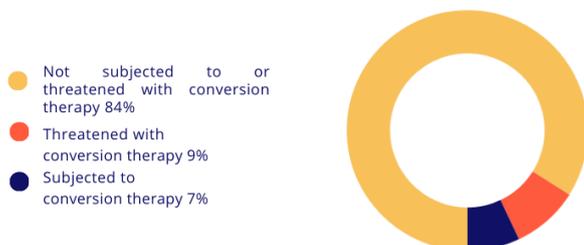
Rates of LGBTQ youth who have been physically threatened or harmed



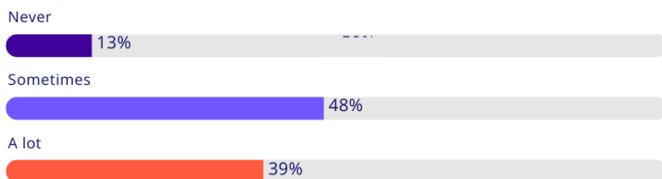
Rates of LGBTQ youth who have experienced discrimination



LGBTQ youth who reported being threatened with or subjected to conversion therapy



LGBTQ youth who reported that recent politics negatively impacted their well-being:

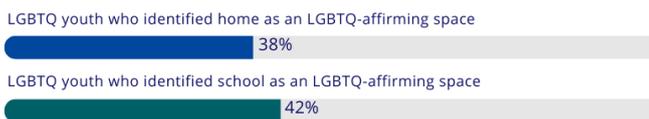


Ways to Support LGBTQ Youth in South Dakota

Research consistently finds that LGBTQ youth who live in accepting communities and feel high social support from family and friends report significantly lower rates of attempting suicide.



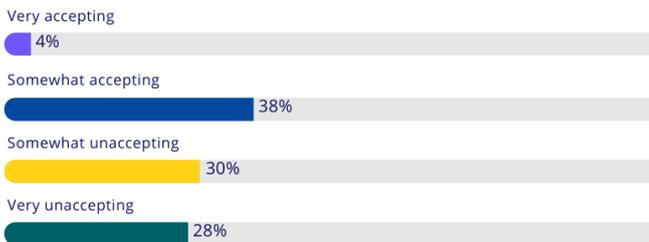
Access to affirming spaces among LGBTQ youth



Social support among LGBTQ youth



Rates of community acceptance of LGBTQ people among LGBTQ youth



What makes a space affirming for LGBTQ young people in South Dakota?



seeing other members of the LGBTQ community • they respect my pronouns • a sense of strong community • acceptance and equality • supportive staff • the people • pride flags • if everyone is kind

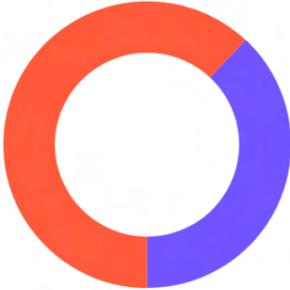
Demographics in South Dakota

The content and methodology for The Trevor Project's 2022 National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health were approved by an independent Institutional Review Board.



Age of LGBTQ youth

- 13 to 17 62%
- 18 to 24 38%



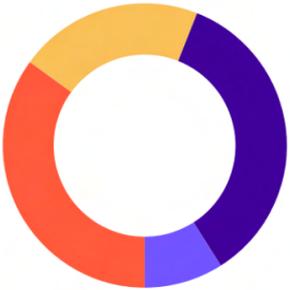
Race/ethnicity of LGBTQ youth

- Asian American/Pacific Islander 3%
- Latinx 4%
- Native/Indigenous 4%
- White 79%
- More than one race/ethnicity 10%



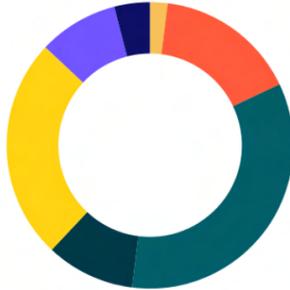
Gender identity among LGBTQ youth

- Girl or woman 35%
- Boy or man 21%
- Nonbinary, bigender, genderfluid, or genderqueer 35%
- Not sure or questioning 9%



Sexual orientation among LGBTQ youth

- Straight 2%
- Gay or Lesbian 16%
- Bisexual 34%
- Queer 10%
- Pansexual 25%
- Asexual 9%
- Questioning 4%



TERMINOLOGY

The following pages provide a summary of key terms that are important to supporting the transgender community. This list is not exhaustive and definitions are always evolving.

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

Agender: Under the non-binary and transgender umbrella, this refers to a person that has no gender identity or has a neutral gender identity.

Bigender: Refers to those who identify as two genders or multi-gender (identifying as two or more genders). Bigender should not be confused with Two-Spirit, which is specifically associated with Native American and First Nations cultures.

Cisgender: Term for people whose gender is the same as the sex they were assigned at birth. Cisgender people sometimes don't realize they are cisgender because they have not had to think about their own gender identity.

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. Drag began as a celebration of gender deviation, with origins in vaudeville and Shakespearean theatre.

The Gender Binary: A system of viewing gender as consisting solely of two categories, termed "male and female," in which no other possibilities for gender or anatomy are believed to exist. The gender binary 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. It largely ignores the existence of Intersex people and is used to exclude non-binary people.

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

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: The physical manifestation of 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 gender nonconforming gender expression may or may not be transgender.

Genderfluid: Gender identity that varies over time. A genderfluid person's gender identity and expression may change constantly or be a fluid and slow movement. It is best to ask what pronouns each genderfluid person uses, whether their pronouns change, and how/if they want you to continue asking if they fluctuate.

Gender Identity: One's internal sense of being male, female, neither of these, both, or other gender(s). Everyone has a gender identity. 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. This can also be used as a blanket term for people who feel that they have a gender identity that falls outside of the societal norm.

Heteronormative: This term refers 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. Intersex people are often assigned to a gender within the binary at birth without their permission. It should be noted that intersex people are born approximately as often as people with red hair are.

Nonbinary / Non-Binary: Used as an adjective, this is an umbrella term for genders other than exclusively binary female/male or woman/man genders. Non-binary identity falls under the larger umbrella of transgender identity, but non-binary individuals may or may not identify as transgender.

Passing: Typically refers to a transgender person being perceived by others as cisgender instead of one's sex assigned at birth. The term is both widely used and debated within the transgender community as the term relies on arbitrary societal gender norms and can connote deception, so be careful with its use. For trans people, passing may or may not be desired and is generally not within a person's control.

Passing Privilege: A trans person who is perceived as cisgender may experience less prejudice, harassment, and risk of violence as well as better employment opportunities. Also known as "cis-assumed privilege," which means people assume the transgender person is cisgender, this shows the reliance on assumptions for this privilege and removes the debated term "passing."

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.

Romantic Orientation: A person's identity in relation to the gender(s) they are romantically attracted to, such as who a person might want to date or have a romantic relationship with. Romantic orientation is often in alignment with one's sexual orientation, but not necessarily.

Sexual Orientation: A person's identity in relation to the gender(s) they are sexually attracted to, which may or may not correspond with one's romantic orientation. In Western cultures, gender identity and sexual orientation are not the same. Trans people can be straight, bisexual, lesbian, gay, asexual, pansexual, queer, etc.

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 (an individual's collection of chromosomes).

Stealth: A transgender person who navigates the world with cis-assumed privilege (see passing privilege) and is not openly transgender to others. Opposite of visible. Some trans individuals may be stealth in all aspects of life, while others may choose to be stealth in only some situations, for example, at work. Similar to the term passing, this term is debated within the transgender community because of the connotations of deception and should be used with caution.

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, and in some cases sexual orientations. Two-Spirit people carry both masculine and feminine entities and can cross social gender roles, gender expressions, and sexual orientations. Every tribal nation and culture have their own language and traditional roles for Two-Spirit people, and only Indigenous people may use this term to describe themselves.

Visible: A transgender person who is openly transgender regardless of how others perceive them.



**Free Teen & Adult clothing
for transgender and
gender-diverse individuals
in SD and the surrounding area**

Watch our Social Media for
clothing drive & volunteer
opportunities, or donate
financial support anytime at:
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If you live more
than 90 miles
from Sioux Falls
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clothing to you
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REMEMBERING ANNIE LANNING

JAN. 4, 1979 - MAY 12, 2022

by Kjerstin Smith



Fierce.

Compassionate.

Hilarious.

These are only a few of the many words that described Annie Lanning. She wore many hats including mother, teacher, and friend, but she wore one hat particularly boldly and unapologetically--that of advocate. Annie was a force to be reckoned with when it came to individuals considered outside the mainstream. She marched. She wrote. She listened. She hugged. She fought for the dignity that is in every human being. It was this passion that led her to volunteer with Transforming South Dakota Magazine. When Annie was asked why she wanted to volunteer for the magazine, she wrote the following on her application. "I support the mission and want to use my editing skills for a good cause."

We are grateful that she did just that. Her vitality, zeal, and dedication are greatly missed. Thank you, Annie, for being a part of the Transforming South Dakota team.



Annie created this Safe Space graphic and shared it on Facebook shortly before passing away. In her words: "Use it freely and pass it on."

TRUE COMMUNITY

by Pastor Lori Hope, St. Mark's Lutheran Church

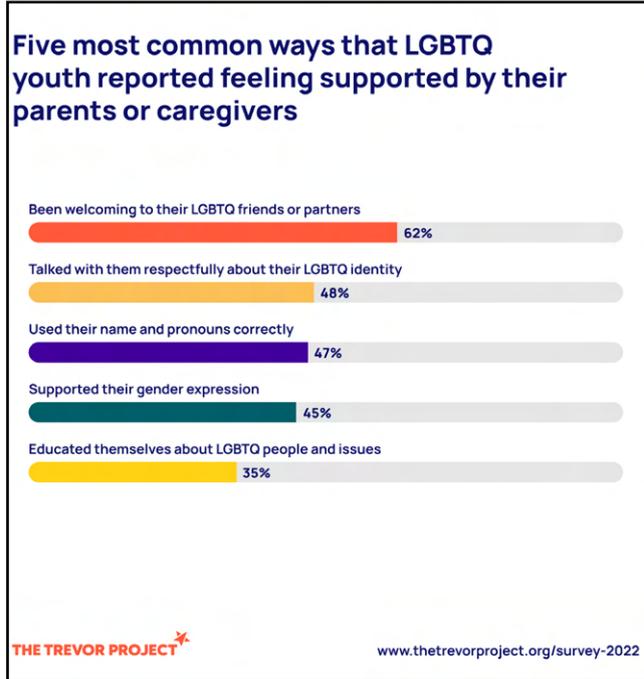
No one should need affirmation that every person is made in the image of God and that God's intention is for every person to live an abundant life.

I believe no denomination, clergy, religion, or parent can prevent God from loving us. Sadly, we all know that is not how religion has treated people historically. Religion has most often acted in destructive and judgemental ways. As a Christian pastor, my understanding is that all people are intended to be part of the body of Christ and not a social issue.

When we look at the life, words, and actions of Jesus, we experience inclusion and love. Period. He welcomed and spoke to everyone. The people who were excluded from the culture and religions of his life were the very people he talked to, ate with, and called by their names. He never spoke about anyone based on gender, sexual orientation, race, or religion being outside the love and grace of God. The only people Jesus criticized were uptight and judgmental religious leaders. Reverend Steven Charleston describes how I try to live out the world as God intended, "We do not all have to agree to be in community, but we all need to abide by the charter of that community. In this spiritual community, that means practicing what we preach. We welcome the stranger. We treat each person with respect. We listen to different viewpoints. We speak conversationally. We pray with and for one another. We stand together in times of need

or danger. Our opinions may vary, but our love remains constant: unity born of diversity."

As a Christian pastor in a state that consistently excludes and restricts, I believe that inclusion only benefits everyone. Our life is only enhanced by the gifts of each person who gathers, leads, and shares their stories. I am grieved to think of all the gifts that were rejected and all the people who felt less than others because some self-righteous people told them they were not welcome. I believe with all my heart (and a lot of theological training) that everyone is a beloved child of God and deserves to be their authentic selves in their homes, vocations, and places of worship.



THE TRANSFORMATION PROJECT

Our mission is to support and empower transgender individuals and their families while educating communities in SD and the surrounding region about gender identity and expression.

**Resources, Counseling, Events,
Youth Groups & Mentorship**

Scan the QR to get a Free Welcome Kit

501(c)3



SUPPORT

EMPOWER

EDUCATE

WWW.TRANSFORMATIONPROJECTSD.ORG



TRANSFORMATION PROJECT ADVOCACY NETWORK

Advocating for the
dignity and well-being
of transgender South Dakotans

Make a financial contribution, volunteer, or participate in legislative action or a committee.

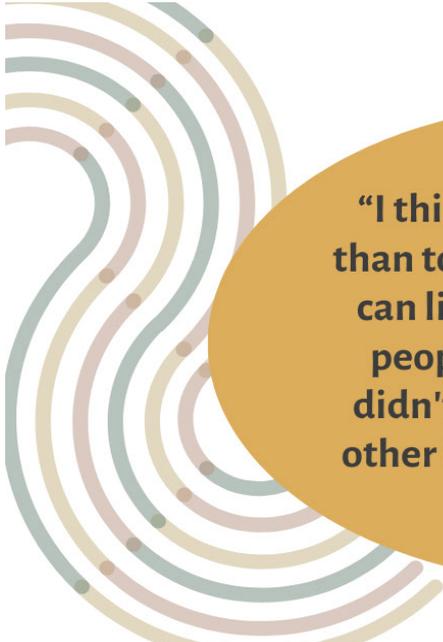
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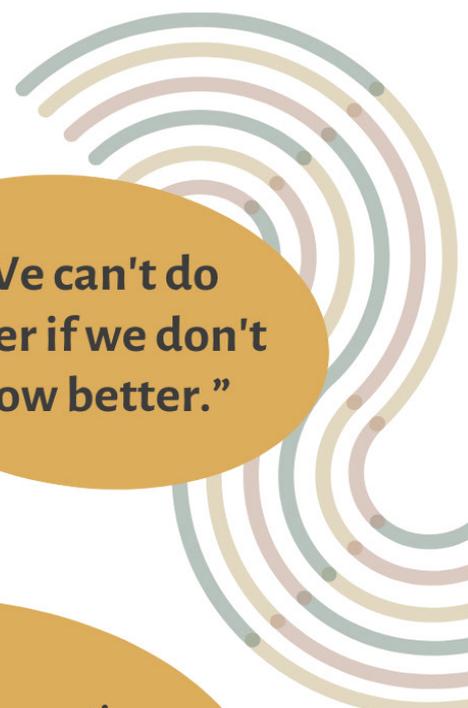
FIGHTING
FOR
TRANSGENDER
EQUITY AND
JUSTICE

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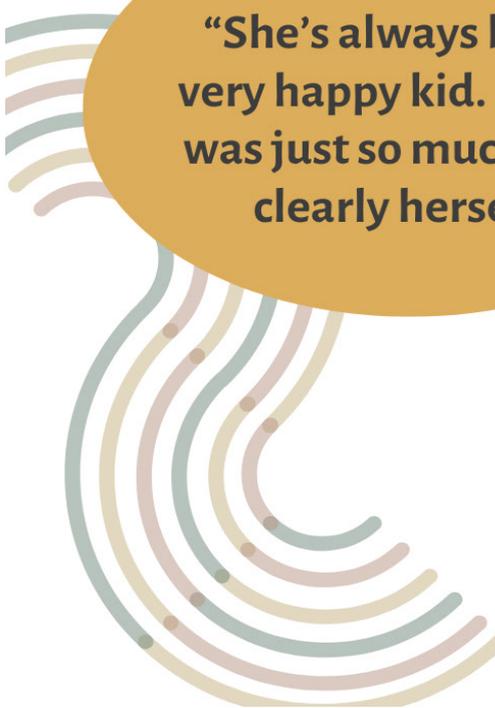
“I think it's different to live than to thrive. Like everybody can live, but we need to see people that are thriving. I didn't have that, and I want other folks to be able to have that.”



“We can't do better if we don't know better.”

“I think so much of the hate that is spreading is because people just haven't taken the time to understand or even try to figure it out.”

“We're not out here wanting to force anything on anybody. We're just saying let our kid and other trans kids live the lives that they're meant to live.”



“She's always been a very happy kid. But she was just so much more clearly herself.”

“And that's when it really hit me how much it meant to him for me to acknowledge him as a son.”

“I think they're afraid of what they don't know and don't understand.”

