

Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation Discrimination in the Workplace

A Practical Guide

Chapter 12: A Parent's Perspective on Gender Affirmations

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**Bloomberg
BNA**

Arlington, VA

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Gender identity and sexual orientation discrimination in the workplace : a practical guide / Editor-in-Chief Christine Michelle Duffy, Esq., Pro Bono Partnership, Parsippany, New Jersey ; State Laws Executive Editor Denise M. Visconti, Esq., Littler Mendelson, P.C., San Diego, California ; with the assistance of The National LGBT Bar Association and its Executive Director D'Arcy Kemnitz, Esq.

pages cm

Includes index.

ISBN 978-1-61746-300-6

1. Transgender people--Employment--Law and legislation--United States. 2. Gays--Employment--Law and legislation--United States. 3. Gender identity--Law and legislation--United States. 4. Transphobia--Law and legislation--United States. 5. Homophobia--Law and legislation--United States. I. Duffy, Christine Michelle, editor. II. Visconti, Denise M., editor. III. Kemnitz, D'Arcy. IV. National LGBT Bar Association

KF3467.5.G46 2014

344.7301'56--dc23

2014027148

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Published by Bloomberg BNA
1801 S. Bell Street, Arlington, VA 22202
bna.com/bnabooks

ISBN 978-1-61746-300-6

Printed in the United States of America

A PARENT'S PERSPECTIVE ON GENDER AFFIRMATIONS

Alexis Grant

Editor's Note: Perhaps no group of people struggle more with gender affirmations than the parents of children with gender dysphoria, regardless of whether the children are young or old when they “come out.” Coming to terms with such a profound change is not easy after the special bonds between parent and child have been deeply formed and a parent’s dreams for the child have been firmly set. In this essay, Alexis Grant explains how she came to terms with her teenage son Michael’s “coming out” as a gender-affirmed woman, Ashleigh.^a

Given that family members can have difficulties coming to terms with gender transitions, it is not surprising that others, including coworkers, may have similar difficulties accepting that gender dysphoria is a legitimate medical condition and that transitioning individuals are neither mentally disturbed nor going through a transient “developmental” phase. As this essay shows, time, education, compassion, and parental love can help family members and others come to understand that gender-affirmed and gender-diverse individuals are the same people they have always been, although with some different external manifestations of their true selves.

Should you wish to learn more about parents coming to terms with gender affirmations and embracing their children’s gender identities, see the resources set forth in the footnote below.^b

^aFor privacy purposes, pseudonyms are being used.

^bBarbara Walters’ April 27, 2007, one-hour *20/20* documentary, *My Secret Self*, featured three gender-affirmed children and their parents. The video, which is available in five parts on YouTube (see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Utpam0IGYac>; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j8F9CaPyQz8>; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1W17z6KeiNY>; http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hSkQIWUX_eI; and http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ib_yE5WILJe), was accompanied by several ABC News online stories: Alan B. Goldberg and Joneil Adriano, “*I’m a Girl*”—*Understanding Transgender Children* (Apr. 27, 2007), available at <http://abcnews.go.com/2020/story?id=3088298> (Jazz’s story); Alan B. Goldberg and Joneil Adriano, “*I Want to Be Seen as Male*” (Apr. 26, 2007), available at <http://abcnews.go.com/2020/story?id=3077906> (Jeremy’s story);

With the conception of each child comes a parent's dreams, hopes, and expectations. Upon the birth and the first physical cradling in one's arms comes the love eternal. My first child's existence started just like that.

While he was in kindergarten, I learned that Michael was extremely gifted, which is why I always thought he saw things in many different lights. When he was four, he asked, "When are you going to buy me a pretty dress?" Once I explained to Michael that dresses were for girls only, he never asked me again. In his early childhood, Michael was equally comfortable moving between kitchen play and playing in the sand and dirt. I always thought he could see both sides of gender and that it didn't matter to him.

During summers, from late elementary school through high school, Michael went to a gifted camp run by Johns Hopkins University, where he always felt he finally fit in with his peers. It was a wonderful experience for him, and they always had a day where you would dress up as the opposite sex. During that time, he never once expressed to us that he felt he was trapped in the wrong body. Michael did ask one time why he couldn't stop his brain from thinking. I had no idea what thoughts he was trying to curb, however.

It was during the end of his sophomore year in high school when I read a note Michael had left by the computer, a conversation between him and his girlfriend at the time. In the note, his girlfriend said that when they graduated, she would help him become the girl he felt himself to be inside. My husband and I sat down with Michael and asked if this was what he truly felt, and he said it was. We were devastated and confused, but at the time thought that once he went through counseling, he would find it was not really how he felt. It was in the counseling that ensued that we learned that parents are the hardest people for a transgender child to tell for fear of rejection.

Jeremy's Letter to His Parents, available at <http://abcnews.go.com/2020/story?id=3078716>; Alan B. Goldberg, *Born With the Wrong Body* (Apr. 25, 2007), available at <http://abcnews.go.com/2020/story?id=3072518> (Riley's story); Joneil Adriano, *Transgender Children Face Unique Challenges* (Apr. 27, 2007), available at <http://abcnews.go.com/2020/story?id=3091754>.

The Maines family, which won a landmark case in the Maine Supreme Judicial Court in 2014 that held that gender-affirmed individuals have the right to use the public restrooms that correspond to their gender identity, is featured in a *Boston Globe* article and two videos featuring Nicole and her father Wayne's speeches at the Gay & Lesbian Advocates & Defenders' 2011 Spirit of Justice Award Dinner. See Bella English, *Identical Twin Boys, One Transgendered, Become Brother and Sister*, BOSTON GLOBE (Dec. 11, 2011), available at http://articles.boston.com/2011-12-11/lifestyle/30512365_1_twin-boys-transgender-jonas or http://www.boston.com/lifestyle/family/articles/2011/12/11/ted_by_the_child_who_simply_knew; *Plaintiff Nicole Maines' Remarks* (Oct. 21, 2011), available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_detailpage&v=XJQmdw-JCu8; *Plaintiff Wayne Maines' Remarks* (Oct. 21, 2011), available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_detailpage&v=8sXid19HrwY; *Doe v. Regional Sch. Unit 26*, 86 A.3d 600 (Me. 2014), *rev'g sub nom. Doe v. Clenchy*, No. CV-09-201 (Me. Super. Ct. Nov. 20, 2012). See also Jesse Green, *S/He: Parents of Transgender Children Are Faced with a Difficult Decision, and It's One They Have to Make Sooner than They Ever Imagined*, NEW YORK MAGAZINE (May 27, 2012), available at <http://nymag.com/news/features/transgender-children-2012-6>; Hanna Rosin, *A Boy's Life*, ATLANTIC MONTHLY (Nov. 2008), available at <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200811/transgender-children>.

We still held on to our expectations that after counseling Michael would understand he was a guy and that he would accept this reality. However, after two years of counseling, we came to realize all our dreams for our bright son would now change. It was difficult at first to lose our dreams and expectations for our son. No one would have been able to understand the feeling of loss except another “trans” parent, of which there were none in our area. Ironically, in retrospect, the counseling was more to help us accept Michael than for Michael to accept himself. He had long ago grown accustomed to who he was to himself, even if he had not felt comfortable introducing that person to us. We learned that Michael suffered quietly for many years, but because he was always a very outgoing person, he kept his inner struggles hidden.

After many sessions of individual and family counseling, and with the help of support groups, we came to accept the child within that Michael had already been aware of for many years. Our first support group, which I found after countless hours of online searching, met at a location an hour from our home. It was initially through this group, which had been started by a parent, that we came to understand what feelings transgender individuals have on the inside, and over the next year and a half we got to see their transformation on the outside.

We of course feared for our own child's future happiness. For Michael, it was indeed a slow transition, taking a full five years, which gave us time to accept who Michael would become and reassuring us that he was fully capable of dealing with his new reality and making the best of it.

Michael was given to doubting he made the right choices—for college, majors, down to the right clothes to buy. If one thing didn't go right, Michael would think he should have chosen the other road. In high school, he wrote an essay about the road not taken, relating to the Robert Frost poem, about deciding his future as Ashleigh. Recently I asked Ashleigh if there was anything she regretted about her gender-confirming surgery. She said that the decision to follow through on who she was internally was the one thing she has never doubted in her life.

Ashleigh is a very subtle female, not the extreme frilly type. She is a natural and when she meets people they easily conclude Ashleigh has always been female, and obviously she has—we just didn't know it at birth or, regrettably, for a long time after that. We wish we had known and could have saved her the years of heartache she experienced. Our child went through a second puberty as she blossomed into Ashleigh. For us, there was an acute sense of loss when the final stage of transition occurred and we experienced the point of no return. But now we know only Ashleigh and we have no doubt that who we really gave birth to was a girl who just happened to be wrapped in a boy's body.

As parents we now have new dreams, hopes, and expectations, only now for our daughter. They include our dream that Ashleigh will in time find a mate, our hope that she will be forever happy with who she is inside and out, and our expectation that she will go on to have a fulfilling career.

They are the same dreams, hopes, and expectations we had when we first held our child in our arms, only now there are some new obstacles and some new possibilities.

The hardest obstacle is determining when, if at all, you tell people the person they see was at one time born a different person on the outside, just below the waist. We know this is the hardest thing that Ashleigh struggles with. She obsesses, by researching in articles and online, over what the appropriate time is. Is it only when she begins to have a serious emotional relationship with another person? Will that other person then no longer like and accept her even though the person did before the person knew? She feels the weight of potential romantic loneliness even though she has many friends, most of whom do not know of her former life. Will someone love her as Ashleigh? Even after knowing she started as Michael?

Although we now know without any doubt that Ashleigh is a woman, we are also concerned that her gender designation at birth may show up on background checks and impede her in her career or, worse yet, prevent her from getting gainful employment. Will an employer, a future love interest, or a friend hold her birth sex against her? We only hope, like our family, that they see the person before them is the same bright, warm person she has always been.

We are all somewhat biased in accepting people for who they are, and that is the hardest thing to change in other people. Many people have preconceived ideas of who transgender people really are, believing that they somehow made a voluntary, impulsive decision to become the opposite sex rather than understanding that the decision was long and agonizingly considered before being acted on, and that they were the opposite sex from birth. Only through education and acceptance can we change the future and the misperception of transgender people. It's not easy, as I know firsthand.

Ashleigh is the same person I cradled in my arms the day she was born, although the blue blanket that had swaddled our newborn has been replaced with a pink one. And the hugs she gives us now are the same hugs he gave us as a child, filled with the same love and perhaps, as well, with a new thankfulness that we accept who this precious being is.