

## Ray's Story

July 2, 2017

Thank you for having me today and for letting me share my story with you.

Often at events in the trans community we go around state our names, pronouns and a silly fact. I'll start with that. My name is Ray, I use he/him pronouns and if I were to be an animal I'd be a giraffe.

I identified as genderqueer for about 10 years, which for me meant in between male and female. I have been considering different types of social and physical transition for year, but I only really got started 7 months ago, so I'm a baby. When I get frustrated that I don't look like a mountain man yet my girlfriend reminds me that I'm still going through my first year of puberty.

I now live in Tucson AZ, where I work as a role model, mentor and skills trainer for kids in the behavioral health system. I'm currently volunteering as a Court Appointed Special Advocate and at a camp for transgender youth called Camp Born This Way.

My assigned sex at birth was female, meaning when I popped out the doctor announced, "It's a girl!" Little did they know at the time I never truly was a girl.

People often ask me when did I first realize that I was male. I believe that for some trans folks they have just known in their core, without a shadow of a doubt. Many of the kiddos that I spend time with are like this. For me my gender has been an evolution, a process. I haven't known I was male for very long but what I did know was that the sex assigned to me at birth did not fit

I have 3 brothers, and as a child I begged my mom for a short haircut like them. In hindsight I should have just asked for a buzzcut because the bowl cut, which was popular at that time, is a hard haircut to pull off under best of circumstances! My mom eventually gave in and let me. I recall her telling me something like, "Fine but when everyone mistakes you for a boy don't complain about it." That certainly happened but he/him pronouns and being perceived as male didn't bother me.

As a young adult I moved up to San Francisco for college with 2 good friends. San Francisco was a safe space, where I first learned and gained understanding into the trans community. At that point I began to identify as genderqueer. Genderqueer is under the trans umbrella but means that the person feels like neither male or female or both, or somewhere in between. It was in that safe space that others close to me came out as transgender and started to transition. While I was suspiciously curious about what they were going through, I still did not know myself well enough to see that it was what I wanted too.

In San Francisco I met the woman I ended up marrying, who was fine with me being genderqueer and embraced me for that, but who did not know the full spectrum of my gender-related dreams.

I know a lot of people who dream about winning the lottery, what type of car they'd by, how they would pay for their parents homes and trips around the world. For many years my dream was getting put in

witness protection. In my mind getting into witness protection was the only way I could have top surgery, which is the reconstruction of my chest to look like a cis male chest. I often talked about this with my best friend. One day she said to me, "You say that a lot. Are you planning on joining the mafia or something? How exactly are you getting in witness protection?" We talked through all the reasons why top surgery would never be a realistic option for me. I was scared. I knew taking the step to get top surgery would mean that I would risk losing relationships, friends, family and most importantly my wife. That alone felt overwhelming; add on the problem of finances and having been through enough negative interactions just from being queer and it seemed like I had better odds of winning the lottery than ever getting top surgery. In spite of all these obstacles, My dear friend spoke words of kindness, hope and truth to me and at that point top surgery became a possibility and there was no turning back.

I finally mustered up the courage to tell my wife. I knew there was a chance of it destroying my marriage but once I allowed myself to feel like there was a possibility of top surgery I couldn't deny it. She didn't take the news very well. From her point of view, any physical transition on my part meant that she was no longer true to her core. Although I had identified as genderqueer throughout our marriage, she had still always identified as lesbian. Top surgery was a step too close to maleness, and meant that we would no longer be compatible.

I'd be lying if I said that I stood firm in my desire for top surgery. I continuously battled with myself. I'd say things like, "I take it back, I don't want it that bad after all. It's not worth losing you." She of course saw right through that. We met with pastor Dayna and started couples therapy together. We spent over a year in therapy together and continued on with our lives. I think I knew in my core that I could not be my true self, and keep my marriage. I tried to focus on cherishing every moment I had left with her and putting as much effort as I could into our relationship, which meant postponing and suppressing things that were becoming increasingly important to my identity. I was in denial, I told myself I would never transition. I lied to myself and to the ones I loved. I couldn't bear the thought of there being no hope for my marriage and if the possibility of top surgery caused so much trouble, transitioning would certainly push things over the edge. We reached a point where our couples therapist told us that she couldn't take us any further. As committed as we were we continued to stick it out and try to work on things. There is nothing more heartbreaking and frustrating than trying to work through something that can't be fixed.

During this time I continued to pursue finding connections in the trans community. I went to a trans family picnic one day. As I looked around I honestly thought that this is what heaven must look like. A group of loving, caring people accepting one another for who they truly are, respecting that, embracing it and being able to rejoice in it. I felt so good after that. My heart was truly full and I felt at home.

While my marriage and my gender ultimately proved incompatible, our relationship has evolved and continued to remain strong. In fact, my now former wife helped me pay for the surgery I needed to feel more comfortable in my skin, and remains one of my strongest advocates. I am especially grateful for her help knowing how many people in my community want to pass better but simply just don't have the access or funds for appropriate health care. Despite the challenges I've had, I know that I have been blessed to have the chance to access surgery and hormones (and maybe one day a full-on Viking beard),

because so many do not have that chance. Beyond just the inherent desire to have an outside that reflects your insides, passing can be essential to the safety of transgender people.

I imagine that some of you think I'm being dramatic but in 2017 there have been 14 known cases of trans people having been murdered for their gender. Aside from fear of being murdered there is the risk of assault, both verbal and physical. I was looking up different studies to provide you with statistics of the violence against trans folks and the fear that we face just going about our days. There were multiple studies with different parameters. I was going back and forth on what statistics to share with you when it really hit me; no trans people should be assaulted in restroom, but the reality is that the majority of trans people have been afraid of using a public restroom because of previous experiences. No one should be disowned by family members but many are. No one should be scared to state their correct pronouns but many are. One of the things that meant the world to me at FCCO was when they turned the restroom out there to a gender neutral one.

Access to restrooms is an extremely stressful challenge for many trans folks. Not every trans person passes well. Just because they don't doesn't mean they are any less male or female than someone who does. Right now I'm in the early stages of transitioning and don't pass, so although it may look odd to see me in the men's restroom I have to go somewhere, it should be where I feel most comfortable. I can't stress the importance of access to safe spaces including restrooms.

The physical process of transitioning has been a whacky, exciting and huge change. I started testosterone a couple months ago. Whenever I hear people say it's a choice I laugh because I think about how I am currently experiencing menopause symptoms and going through puberty at the same time. No one ever wakes up thinking, "gosh I wish I would have hotflashes, zits and get hangry today." But it's part of the process in order to have your outside appearance reflect who you are inside.

When I was thinking about how to share my transition with my larger community I consulted my best friend and asked if it would be weird to just make a Facebook post, because I didn't want to have a million conversations. She said I should do it but to make it joyful, not depressing or ashamed. With this in mind I decided to do an "it's a boy" announcement. My heart was filled with all the positive responses. I received so many messages from people saying how much they admired me and were proud. I also received messages from Christian folks who decided that God put on their hearts to condemn me.

Faith has always been a big part of my life. A trans person of faith does not need to hear, "Do you honestly believe that God makes mistakes?" We've already battled this. I believe both pastors Dayna and Michelle can testify to this. I wrestled with it for a long time, in the beginning I didn't get an answer to that prayer but I couldn't just be someone I'm not. I cried out to God, "Why would you put me in this body?" "Why would you allow people to be so cruel?" "Why would you guide me into a marriage that wasn't going to work?" and at times, "Why did you even create me to begin with?" I've come to learn though that I too am fearfully and wonderfully made and those prayers that I cried out were coming from the same place as the prayers of other non trans Christians; prayers that sound like, "Why would you allow this kid to have cancer?", "Why do you allow people to be born with seemingly impossible

challenges or disabilities?” and “Why did you allow her to be abused?” God doesn’t make mistakes but when hard times hit us we have all struggled to navigate holding on to faith while not fully understanding.

I received other questions from family and others. I already had asked myself many questions but out of fear for my future I heard things like: “How will you be employed?” and “How will you find a partner?” The answer to some questions is simply, that I don’t know but I’ll figure it out as I go and nothing is worth living as someone I’m not.

Tucson is an amazing community and I’ve received love and acceptance from a transmasculine support group and the community as a whole. When I talked to my pastor about fully transitioning and a name change her response was, “I bet there is a liturgy for that!” Needless to say I have an amazing faith community.

Since coming out I’ve seen so many ways that God has turned my struggle into something so awesome and beautiful. Through coming out on Facebook I received messages from people with friends or family going through transition and struggling with it. I’ve had the opportunity to make connections with trans kiddos through volunteering and work that I would have never had the opportunity to connect with on that deep level previously.

While some things about being transgender seem tough or even bleak, it doesn’t take much to make an enormous difference. According to an article published in BMC Public Health 22-43% of trans people attempt suicide across Europe, Canada and the US. When trans people have support from friends and family they are 82% less likely to attempt suicide. Since coming out I’ve been able to be a support. I’ve been able to be inspired by the incredible strength and self awareness of trans youth and to be an advocate and ally for them. They are beautiful, smart and resilient. Often I find myself being scared for them. I try to prepare them for the struggles they will face and to build up them up so that they can face those and come out the other side just as strong or stronger for being who they are. One of my kiddos that I spent time with told me they started to go to church, rather than be excited that they may have the opportunity to experience the love of Christ I got scared. Scared because of the big possibility that they are going to be condemned, rejected and denied when they expose their true feelings. I got panicked when a kiddo told me that they weren’t afraid to go into a restroom, knowing how common it is to experience hatred in the restroom, my first thought was, “they will be soon.” My heart broke when I reflected on my internal responses. The truth is though that I struggle with the challenges and hatred that comes from being trans. My hope and prayer is that one day my first response won’t be of fear. My hope is that one day the primary challenge won’t be from outside sources but rather understanding their most true selves entirely, and that they will have a loving and supportive community around them on that journey.

Thank you for letting me share my story with you today.