

THE VOICE OF PATIENTS AND FAMILIES

Loving Unconditionally

Anonymous

A nurse and mother writes anonymously about her transgender child, and describes her feelings through the multi-layered coming out process. The parental dreams for her child that were based on societal norms, changed to reflect the goals and dreams of her transgender child. While the LGBTQ community has had wide acceptance nationwide, there still is work to be done where discrimination still occurs in several states.

Keywords: transgender; LGBTQ; nonbinary; unconditional love; discrimination

Editor's Note: *Creative Nursing* does not accept unsigned submissions, but we do publish articles without identifying the author when there is a compelling reason for anonymity. In this article, the identity of the author's child is protected in this way.

Imagining what kind of adult life each of us will have occupies the minds of little ones—at least it did for me. I thought, someday I will grow up and marry my handsome prince. We will have children and live happily ever after. When I met my husband at a friend's birthday party, I knew in a moment that he was the one. He worked for a major airline, and I worked as a nurse at a local hospital. We married when he was 25 and I was 22. I had always wanted three children; my husband is the eldest of nine and certainly didn't want a family the size he grew up in. He wasn't sure exactly how many he wanted, but smaller was better. Our first child, a son, was born 14 months after we married. He was adorable but not the easiest baby. His gross motor developmental milestones were late. He started walking at 26 months with leg braces. He had hypotonia and ataxia, and started seeing a neurologist before he was a year old.

Three years later we had a daughter, a healthy baby who met her developmental milestones mostly on time. She showed similar but milder ataxia, so with symptoms similar to her brother's, more testing followed for our son. By age 4 he was diagnosed with a degenerative cerebellar spinal disease which was determined through exclusion, not via confirmed diagnosis. We were told he would be in a wheelchair

by the time he was a teenager and would die at about 35 years of age. With this information, we felt that our family was complete.

In preparation for our son eventually being in a wheelchair, we moved into a single-level house in an excellent suburban school district. Two years after moving into our new house, I had an unplanned pregnancy end in a miscarriage. The desire to have three children came back to life and I took the miscarriage hard. As I sat crying in my obstetrician's office, he looked at me and said, "It looks like you wanted to be pregnant." I explained the special needs of our son, and he said, "If you want a third child, put it in the Lord's hands." I went home and told my husband what the doctor had said; we were excited to try for a third child. When she was born, our family felt complete again, and we enjoyed watching our youngest meet and exceed her developmental milestones. We were thrilled that she didn't have the same developmental issues as her brother and sister.

As our youngest grew up, she showed us her easygoing personality and her quick wit. She always had us laughing. She had distinct clothing preferences, always wanting to wear pants or shorts and never a dress. For her second birthday, I bought her a dress to wear for her 2-year-old photos. Our easygoing little girl had a major meltdown and tried to take her dress off during the photos.

She started kindergarten at a private school where uniforms were required. She refused to wear the plaid jumper that all the other girls wore. Instead, she insisted on wearing pants and contrasting polo shirts,

which was also an option. She was athletic and could keep up with the boys, playing touch football and soccer. Soon she had holes in the knees of her pants, so we had to buy the boys' uniform pants that had double-padded knees. She attended this school from kindergarten through eighth grade; each year before buying her school uniform we would ask her if she would like us to buy the jumper, and each year we bought boys' padded-knee pants and polo shirts instead. People thought of her as a tomboy. She wore her hair short when most of the girls had long hair. Her friends were both girls and boys.

When our youngest was seven, we were visiting family in California. They have a daughter exactly 1 year older than our youngest. The two girls were playing, and our daughter's play preferences were very different than my niece's. Our daughter didn't like playing with dolls, dressing up, or other typical girls' activities. She wanted to go outside, kick the ball, and play with the boys.

Our daughter started high school at a private school where most of her grade-school classmates went as well. Again, they had the jumper uniform, but she opted for the pants and polo shirt option. She liked androgynous dress. She joined the girls' soccer team in the fall and the lacrosse team in the spring, played trumpet in the school band, was in honors classes, and took advanced placement classes her junior and senior years. She had friends of both sexes, was well liked, and did well in school. One thing I never heard her talk about was boys. She never had a crush on a boy or had posters of boys in her room. She didn't date, but many of her friends didn't date either. They did things in groups, so I didn't think it was unusual.

At the beginning of her junior year, she decided to wear the school jumper instead of the pants and polo shirts. She started wearing mascara, and attended school dances with a boy among a large group of friends. She told us her date was a friend but not a boyfriend. She grew her hair long and looked like a typical girl. She continued soccer and lacrosse and did well in sports.

In January of her junior year, my husband's job was transferred out of state. We gave our daughter the choice of staying at her current high school for her senior year and I would stay with her, or she could move to the new town with her dad and me. She chose to stay at her current school, which meant that my husband and I would be living separately. Fortunately, we have airline passes so can fly free of charge, space available. In our new town, we bought a house and declared residency in the new state.

Our children teach us who they are, and the dreams they have for themselves.

Each weekend, either my husband or I would travel to our other home.

We settled into our new routine, and our daughter started her senior year of high school. As a senior, she went back to the pants and polo shirts, stopped wearing makeup, and grew her hair long. As a teenager, she was a joy to live with—she didn't have mood swings and never cried. In November I asked her if she planned to attend the school Christmas dance. She said, "I have something to tell you." With unprecedented tears in her eyes, she said, "I think I'm gay." Even though in the cobwebs of my mind I had thought this may be a possibility from time to time, it was hard to hear the words from her. We shared tears and hugs, and I told her I loved her very much. Since I was going to be traveling the next weekend to see my husband, I asked her if she would like me to share this news with her dad, or if she would like to tell him instead. She agreed that she would tell him.

Tears filled my eyes more often than usual in the next few days. Not because I didn't accept her for being gay, but the hopes and dreams I had for her as our daughter needed to change. She came out before marriage equality became law. Being gay was not as widely accepted as it is today. The dream of her getting married and having children was gone, or at least I thought.

I truly believe that God puts us in situations at times to prepare us for something that is to come. We have lived next door to gay couples in three of the six houses we have owned. I've gone to a gay hairdresser for 30 years. I have cousins who are gay.

For the rest of her senior year, life continued as it had been. I promised to let her tell her dad her news, but the months passed and I still held this secret in me. The night of her graduation she attended the all-night school lock-in where games are played, vendors provide services, and fun is had by all. When she came home at 5 a.m. her long hair was gone—she had a short haircut given by one of the salons providing makeovers for the graduates. I knew why she cut her hair, but my husband still did not know what it meant, except that she got a haircut. She looked great in short hair, but I mourned the loss of her beautiful long hair and the feminine attribute it brought.

I am very grateful that my child is living in a time they have the same human rights as I do.

Later that summer, while eating brunch, she finally told my husband that she is gay. I was very relieved; 8 months of keeping that secret was difficult. My husband was supportive, loving, and not completely surprised. Hugs, tears, and “I love you” followed. In the fall, we moved our daughter into her dorm at the university in the southern state where my husband was living. That same day we walked over to the campus LGBTQ Resource Center where she introduced herself and us to the center’s director. The director said that this was the first time she had ever met the parents of an LGBTQ student—many parents were not supportive of their LGBTQ child or did not know that their child was LGBTQ. This made me very sad for the students who did not feel that they could tell their parents or feel that their parents would support them.

During college, she had a couple of unhealthy female relationships, and suffered bouts of depression. Her college years looked more like a teenager’s high school years, with the struggles that often go with them. She graduated the same year that marriage equality became the law.

Her first job after graduation was back in the city where she grew up. She reconnected with high school friends as well as new friends. One of her new friends was lesbian, and introduced her to other LGBTQ members in the community.

In 2017 I noticed on her Facebook page that she had changed her identity from gay to nonbinary. She let us know that she identified with being transgender and preferred the pronouns they, them, their. Believe me, I’ve messed up a few times using the new pronouns. Our child started wearing a chest binder and started taking testosterone last year. Their voice has lowered, but their physical appearance looks the same. Their humor, gentle personality, and loving nature

haven’t changed. The testosterone has decreased the mood swings they were having, especially around their periods, which have subsided. Their clothing style continues to be androgynous. At this point, they have not shared with us any intention of chest reconstruction or gynecologic surgery. In the future they may want to give birth to a child. Their name has not changed.

Parenting is the hardest job there is. We are never sure if we are doing it correctly, as each of our children is unique. Our dreams and expectations for our children should not be determined by dominant culture. Our children teach us who they are, and the dreams they have for themselves. I know in my heart that children are born with their sexual orientation and gender expression—they do not choose to be gay or transgender. There is no changing their orientation either. This has given me comfort, knowing that our child was born this way and God made them perfect in His eyes. He has asked us to be their parents and love them unconditionally, which has been a privilege. I am very grateful that they are living in a time when being LGBTQ is more widely accepted, and they have the same human rights as I do. Although I find it upsetting that 12 states still do not prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity in public and private employment (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LGBT_employment_discrimination_in_the_United_States, January, 29th 2020). Support for the LGBTQ community must come from all of us, and we need to fight for nondiscrimination laws in all 50 states.

Our youngest child provides some of the personal care for our 40-year-old son, who struggles with his ataxia, walks with leg braces, and is not in a wheelchair. Our middle daughter is married and has four children; they call our youngest Zizi instead of Auntie.

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The author of this article is a nurse. This article was written with her child’s consent.