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### Embracing Authenticity

Although the term “transgender” didn't originate until the 1960s, people have always challenged gender conformity. One moment in history people usually go back to is the Stonewall Riots and the queer icons from the 1960s involved in it. Benji Bengtson (they/them), a 15-year-old transgender youth from the Bay Area describes how there was so much before and after that uprising which has led to where we are today. Bengtson emphasizes people like Marsha P. Johnson “fought and sacrificed their lives for us to have what they are currently attempting to take away.”

When it comes to the topic of the hate put on transgender people in the United States, many allies and LGBTQ+ people will readily agree that it is heartbreaking, while transphobic and ignorant people maintain that transgender people are “dangerous” to our society. A transgender person is someone whose gender identity or expression does not correlate with the sex they were assigned at birth. It has become common today to dismiss the discrimination, prejudice, and hate growing towards the transgender community, due to the brutal assaults and repetitive attacks on individual’s rights, making us numb to the problem.

NPR journalists Coco Nakajima and Connie Hanzhang Jin report, “over the past two years, state lawmakers introduced at least 306 bills targeting trans people, more than in any previous period. A majority of this legislation, 86%, focuses on trans youth”. These bills targeting youth include banning transgender people from sports teams, restricting them from

using the bathroom that reflects their gender identity, prohibiting gender-affirming medical care, and things that would not be threats to cis-gendered people. Additionally, “85% of trans and nonbinary youth said their mental health was negatively affected by these laws” as “more than half of trans and nonbinary youth "seriously considered" suicide in the past year” (Nakajima and Jin).

On February 11, 2023, Brianna Ghey, a 16 year old transgender girl from Birchwood in Warrington, Cheshire, England was found dead with stab wounds (“Transgender community mourns death”). On Twitter, many such as Senthorum Raj spoke out saying, “Young trans people deserve to thrive in a world that nurtures their humanity. Their lives must be protected, not debated. We all have a responsibility to challenge the insidious ways the media and politicians dehumanise trans people.” In Bengtson’s view, these losses of life are “causing a lot of pain. And I think we need to take measures to ensure it. As long as people are dying, as long as people are having their basic medical care and bathroom privileges being taken away. We're not toddlers, as long as this is happening to a community, we need to do something.” They illustrate how it is not only killing and dismissing their deaths that are contributing to the insidious ways that Raj mentions, but even denying bathroom access or treating the community like toddlers. Bengtson is an authentic, determined transgender youth, and activist who empowers youth by illustrating that transgender people are not a threat to anyone, and instead are just human beings who have not had an opportunity to tell their stories.

In addition to the hate the transgender community is facing, many political leaders are passing laws hypocritically compared to their past actions. Political leaders such as Tennessee Governor Bill Lee recently made it a felony to dress in drag in public (“Tennessee governor signs first-of-its-kind bill”). Ohio Republican Josh Mantel called drag “child abuse” (Schneck). George

Santos supported “don’t say gay bills” as well as aligned himself with those who believe drag is a crime (El Hammar Castano and Steakin). Political leaders enforcing hate upon transgender people can’t have it both ways. Their assertion that everything was “simpler” back then, is contradicted by their action of dressing in drag in the past, before they decided to make it a political issue.

Transgender is an umbrella term for many terms that fall under it. Bengtson identifies with the term gender fluid and gender queer, after realizing that “[my gender] is always going to be constantly changing and I have to prepare for that because I can't always be one thing.” While those who do not identify as gender fluid see themselves as a fixed gender every day when they wake up, it fluctuates for those like Bengtson feeling feminine one day and masculine the other. Although there is no data on how common this fluidity is among the transgender community, the responses from the Ipsos global survey shows how “4 percent of young adult respondents identified as transgender, nonbinary, gender-nonconforming, gender-fluid” (Schermele). Ever since childhood, Bengtson had always been gender queer, stating that they “would play with all sorts of toys. I would dress myself from the age of three and I would dress in all sorts of things, skirts, button ups, converse...” Eric Bengtson, their father, thought “it was great to see Benji kind of feel more confident and comfortable expressing themselves.” But, not everyone was unanimous as Bengtson began being called slurs: “[the bullies] don't think that we can hear them saying these things about us. They don't think that I can hear the word f\*\*\*t being yelled at me in the halls. They think I'm numb to it now. But in a way, I am numb to it now because it's happened so many times...” Although Bengtson has been living in the Bay Area where it is more open and progressive than other areas of the United States, people are still spreading hate and discriminating against those who are “different” from them. Los Altos High School’s *Talon*

published a story about racist vandalism that was written on the stalls of the newly installed gender-neutral bathrooms. Bella Sturiale, President of Gender & Sexuality Awareness, states, “‘That’s not just writing the N-word’ ... ‘They know exactly what they’re doing...The rampant hatred of LGBTQ+ people is often rooted in racism and white supremacy...it’s not like somebody who’s racist is going to happen to support gay people’ ” (qtd. in Kim et al.). This isolated many gender non-conforming students who felt the space was no longer safe, as they saw racism and queerphobia linked together. Bengtson used the gender-neutral bathrooms throughout their freshman year, but they “have not gone in there for a while because of safety.” They describe how “you have to be authentic for yourself, but you have to keep yourself safe. Because for me, I wanted to go to the neutral bathroom so bad, but I was like, I don’t feel comfortable being exposed in a scene where there are prolific words and slurs and things being written in there.” When we bring up many of these prejudices and discriminations around marginalized groups, most have been anonymous because people are scared. Bengtson says, “I think that they don’t know much about us and. They never try to. So they make claims and they throw their knives. And they don’t realize how many people they can hurt.”

Last spring when Bengtson identified as a boy (before realizing they were gender-fluid), they had the opportunity to perform at their school’s diversity rally. They took the chance to read their poem surrounding their experience of being transgender. At the school gym, as thousands of students crowded next to each other on the bleachers, Bengtson stepped up and took a seat on the high stool. Their head was held high, with the transgender flag wrapped around their neck and displayed on their back. They smiled widely and took a deep breath.

In their poem, “Boyish”, Benji Bengtson explores their identity:

I’m a boy

But I look like a girl

My gentle curves caress the air

Hugging myself tightly

My chest, soft

But no.

My body is boy

My curves are boyish because they're mine

My blood is boyish because it comes from my veins

I'm a boy because I feel it. Right here..." (1-10).

Bengtson continued to read their poem optimistically as they celebrated and announced their identity to the school, but Bengtson started to hear giggling noises. They looked into the crowd and noticed the students pointing their phones directly at Bengtson – recording Bengtson's performance without their consent. Bengtson took the opportunity to perform their poetry during the rally so "people would hear me when I said, 'Hey, I am this, I am a boy, I am non-binary' and that is valid." They hoped that people would hear and empathize with them which would spread more awareness of the transgender community to the school, but, instead, "it was empowering and hurtful because who are they to tell me that I can't be this and that? I want to make change, but it's also like I'm going to go cry in my bed because it is so overwhelming how much hate there is in the world." Bengtson tries to stay resilient about making changes at their school, but it can get overwhelming when students don't even try to listen and understand those who are seen as 'different' around them. According to research at UCLA, "Two out of five (42.5%) transgender participants...ages 18 to 40 reported that they felt they did not fully belong at school at some point in their lives because they are LGBTQ" (Kerith J. Conron, et al.). More than half

of those like Bengtson have never felt like they belonged in a school setting because of their differences, leading to an increase in a need for support. By “Respecting pronouns, referring to their child by their preferred name, and assisting with access to gender-affirming health care” transgender youth’s mental health improves with “lower rates of depression, suicidal ideation, and suicidal behavior” allowing them to feel more confident and letting them “counter the transphobic messages they may be hearing from the outside world” (“For Parents of Trans Youth”). If parents or guardians respectfully take action and say these things, it can help boost their child’s mental health by a lot, making them feel safe and comforted at home, even if they do not feel the same outside.

When Bengtson struggles to find a community in Los Altos, they watch Transgender creators from Tik Tok, such as Dylan Mulvaney, a transgender actress, comedian, and Tik Tok personality posting and sharing about her transition journey. Bengtson looks up to these content creators such as Dylan and how they are confidently expressing themselves despite the hate. But, in addition to these authentic videos like Mulvaney posts, Bengtson frequently sees transphobic videos where other creators are misgendering and obliterating a transgender person. While someone might scroll away thinking, “Oh, well, life is life”, it triggers anxiety and panic attacks for Bengtson (Bengtson). It makes them realize their own struggles of being called slurs across the hallways, being barked at, and being recorded without consent due to their identity and how they express themselves. Even things that may seem “small” to cis-gendered people such as pronouns are triggering, considering how Bengtson have “been misgendered by almost everyone in my life, and it keeps happening every day, even by people I’m out to. Even by people I keep reminding.”

As an activist who sees value in “something as small as posting something on your story and saying donate or donating to something,” Bengtson works to educate those around them and connect with their community. In addition, Bengtson hands out binders and pronoun bracelets to those in need. Transgender masculine people use binders which are a compression undergarment worn to flatten breasts. Bengtson states, “our breasts are a very thing that very much bothers us and makes us very dysphoric.” Bengtson remembers when they got their first binder, “...from an 18 year old trans man, and he was like a big brother to me because I was so new to the community and I was so new to all of this. I didn't know how to tell my parents. I didn't know how to tell anybody. But I told him and he was like, okay, let me get you this binder and a copy of Dracula...” Bengtson finds themselves searching for that but they “take it upon myself to be that for other people.” Bengtson describes how “this week, I gave two binders away to another trans person who's a seventh grader... they were very eager, and their parents kept taking away their binders, which I've never had to struggle with, thankfully.” They go on to explain how it is very hard to get a hold of binders when they were not out, but since “I have a lot of binders in my closet because I've grown out of them and I keep them, I give them away because I want other people to feel that euphoria and feel like they're protected.” Bengtson believes that having older transgender people who can help you and understand what you are going through is so beneficial because not many people have a chance to get this kind of support. Although Bengtson has received support from their parents, it was “only to a point that cis people people can understand.” Bengtson shows that having these kinds of people in the community is incredible, and hopes that they are becoming the person that “people can come to, and I think I'm reaching that.” Even if it is giving out hugs, Bengtson is happy to support another who is going through a similar experience they are going through because they have “been the person that's been refused

help...I just really want to be the person that people can come to and say, 'Hey, I'm struggling with this.' ” By continuing to live authentically and expressing themselves who they are without shame, they “want to be someone who can help people realize who they are... so other people can say, like, 'Hey, I want that for myself' and and I want to be the person that can help them reach that.”

Bengtson plans to continue being a resource for their community and advocate for transgender youth. They are currently in the process of receiving testosterone, but are “worried that the bills or presidencies will come in later and prevent me from doing so.” Although we are not able to combat this issue of hate in a blink of an eye, something that helps those who are afraid of difference and change is education. Bengtson suggests how “we just need to tell them that, just because someone is different does not make them your enemy. Just because someone is trans does not threaten the system, your cisness or your straightness.”



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