



ALLIES & ANGELS

A memoir of our family's transition

Terri and Vince Cook

Praise for Allies & Angels

“Allies & Angels is about parenting and faith and living authentic lives. It explores the ways in which we can support our children through love, kindness, compassion and acceptance. It highlights what can happen when we have the love and support of family, and others who are open-minded enough to become part of a life changing journey. As a professional advocate for the trans and gender non-conforming community I reap rewards beyond any expectation. The Cooks are a significant part of those rewards. They have found a way to share this story, acknowledge all that contributed in some positive way, critique those who wish us harm and highlight significant challenges others face when they don't have support. Read this book if you want to know how to parent your children through any challenge, big or small, significant or fleeting. Come to understand that “suppressing and rejecting” a [transgender] child robs them and adds tremendously to the already existing burdens that are part of life. This book is a gift that teaches that a change in perspective can have a miraculous impact in ways unimaginable.”*

—Sheilah R. Sable, Director of Organizing for the Empire State Pride Agenda

“Allies & Angels is a story that has the power to open your heart and your mind. Terri and Vince show us what it means to wholly and unconditionally love our children as the wonderful people they were meant to be. Their story is one of compassion, learning, and support that anyone who has or works with children and youth can understand and relate to, even if they don't know someone who is transgender. Their family's journey, through both laughter and tears, offers hope to families and young people going through similar experiences. After reading Allies & Angels you will certainly walk away with a greater understanding of what it is like to be transgender. If you allow yourself to, you will also understand the joys of loving someone who is transgender.”

—Marissa Rice, Director of Youth Services, AIDS Community Resources

“Once I started reading Allies & Angels, I didn't want to put the book down. Reading this took me back 20 years when I came out to my parents. I wish there had been a book like this for them. This book reminded me of struggles others face when we come out as transgender. As someone who works with transgender youth, Allies and Angels provides an important perspective on the lives of transgender youth through the eyes of two parents. By sharing their struggles with coming to terms with Drew's transition and then dealing with the world around them, Terri and Vince offer hope to transgender people, their family and friends ... and help others understand what it means to be

transgender. This book is a must-read for not only parents of transgender children, but anyone who knows someone who is transgender.”

—Rob Pusch, Syracuse University, Associate Director at Project Advance and Q Center transgender youth group facilitator

“Allies & Angels has an urgent message, but it does not tell you what to think—instead it shows, through the powerful, heart-wrenching narrative of a loving family, what a difference individuals can make in the lives of transgender youth. I hope it becomes the go-to book for the parents of such kids, and that it inspires the same kind of compassion and respect shown by Drew’s family. It should be required reading for all who work with children and young adults of any gender. I’m a little older than Drew, but also grew up in the suburbs of Syracuse, New York and also came out as transgender in my teens. I faced many of the same issues, from big things like bullying and suicidal depression to so-called little things like the pain of school dances and old family photos. Although few struggles compare to being a young man in a female body, there still is little guidance available for these boys or their loved ones. I wish such a book had existed for me and my parents during those difficult years and I hope this helps such families realize they aren’t alone. It will definitely improve, and most likely save, many young people’s lives.”

—Elliott DeLine, Author of *Refuse* and *I Know Very Well How I Got My Name*

“Allies & Angels is a powerful story that would benefit anyone interested in growing in love and understanding. It certainly benefited me. The story provides you with a comprehensive understanding of not only what their son went through, but the entire family, when discovering their daughter is really their son. It’s a book that anyone should be able to relate to as a parent, a friend, as a human being. It will hopefully open the eyes of those who are quick to judge, and to instead “walk in somebody else’s shoes.” The Cooks could be your best friends, your neighbors, relatives or classmates. They give an honest and inspiring account about the power of love, courage and acceptance.”

—Tami Scott, Editor of *Allies & Angels* and *Baldwinsville Messenger*

“As someone who came out only six months ago at the age of 22, and whose parents are in the early stages of understanding and acceptance, this book was very emotional for me. The Cook family’s story is so inspiring and heartfelt. Thank you for making yourself vulnerable and writing this story so that others may find hope and come to better understand the experiences of trans people and their families. I can only imagine what my life would be like now had I had the strength, courage, and support that*

Drew had, in particular from his family and the Q Center, to come out at a younger age. A great book for anyone to read—whether you're trans, you have family or friends that are, or you just want to learn a little bit more."*

—Al Forbes, Syracuse University graduate student

*"Live authentically." "Find your passion." "We are all connected." These are familiar concepts to those of us in the self-help, life coach, and spirituality realm. I've read a lot about these ideas, but it's a whole other experience to watch the Cook family live them every day. Now with their new book, *Allies & Angels*, others can benefit from their enduring story of love and acceptance. This book is a real life example of how living authentically, finding your passion, and realizing that we are all connected can bring more love, joy and compassion into your life. The knowledge and understanding gained by reading this book will make you an angel in someone else's life. In my mind, there is no greater gift that you could give yourself and the human experience."*

—Gloria Ierardi, Life Coach

"I remember when I first talked to you. I hung onto every word of your emails... literally... they were my only hope. I never felt so alone and so scared for my son and prayed for myself to gain some understanding. As you know... families should not have to go through crisis to that extent. A book like this would have been priceless to me. You and Vince will be helping so many people with this book. Thank you for being there for me, Terri. You don't realize it, but you and the Q Center gave me understanding where I had very little. I am a much better person for it. Just take a look at my son... he is happy. That says it all."

—Laurie, Nurse and parent of a transgender son

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To Billy...
for teaching us how to live.

To Drew...
for helping us see who we are
and who we want to be.

We love you both so much, more than words can say.

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And finally, although this book is dedicated to both of them, we also wish to close with acknowledging our wonderful children, Billy and Drew. The two of you have brought so much joy and love

into our lives. You have made us better people. We thank you for encouraging and supporting us as we wrote this book and for all the sacrifices you have made so that we could pursue our passion and purpose.

Foreword

My name is Drew. I'm the son you are going to read oh-so-much about in this book. My parents have always dreamed about changing the world—helping people—and I never doubted them once. This book is just one of several steps toward reaching that dream. They have already helped so many. I am extremely lucky to have parents like mine.

Like any teenager, I like to think everything is about me, but my family's lives were affected by my transition almost as much as mine. Experiences like mine are rarely talked about and resources for what my parents went through are practically nonexistent.

I hope that I can help others by enthusiastically supporting my mom and dad as they bravely put their faces, lives and feelings up for public scrutiny. Although I fully support my parents in this endeavor, I'm not going on the book tour or doing any interviews to help publicize their book. I got a late start being Andrew, and I'm ready to begin a new chapter in my life—just as my parents are starting a new chapter in their lives. I look forward to meeting new people in college, and I don't want to be known as “that trans guy.” I want to be known for my character and achievements, not for my medical condition. I am finally getting to be a teenager and have a plain old normal life. I hope you can understand, respect, and accept that.

This book is for those who are in my situation, or my family's, or for those who just want to open their mind to a life experience that differs from their own.

Thanks for reading our story. I hope you like it. I hope it changes you and makes you a bit more aware of the struggles that so many people like me have gone through and continue to go through. I hope it makes you more of an ally, not just to trans people but to all people.

—Andrew “Drew” Cook

Chapter 1



Introduction

The greatest obstacle to discovery is not ignorance—it is the illusion of knowledge.

—Daniel Boorstin

When you first find out you're having a baby, you often think about all the beautiful moments and memories you have ahead of you. You read books to help you learn about parenting, to prepare you for any circumstance that may come your way; even if those techniques get tossed out the window as soon as your baby cries or delivers his first tantrum!

You think of all the fun ways you'll teach your child about nature, about life, about love and compassion ... Truth is, at this point, you rarely if at all think about what the child will teach you.

Children are constant reminders of all things new. When a child first sees a flower bloom, first hears a kitten's purr, or feels the first blunt sting of a bumble bee—it becomes a first time for you all over again. And this time, you see things differently. Children become the teachers, we become the students, and our world forever transforms us.

My husband and I wrote this book to share a difficult life experience—something we learned from our child, which indeed forever transformed us. Our hope is that by being vulnerable, by taking this chance and telling our story, others will find our experience useful, comforting, and enlightening. We follow in the lead of many that have gone before us and shared their stories. Their courage has been our blessing.

As proud parents of two young men, we faced something that wasn't covered in any of the parenting books we read. You see, we didn't always know we had two sons. Our younger child was born a girl and for fifteen years we believed we were raising a daughter. Our precious child, who we now know is our son, is transgender.

It has been, and continues to be, quite a journey for our family. We supported our teenage son with his transition from female to male.

If you happen to be, know, or love somebody who is transgender, this memoir may warm your heart. If this subject is foreign to you, if it's a topic you know very little about, your initial reaction may be one of discomfort or judgment.

Many people who haven't had much exposure or education about being transgender typically experience a range of reactions, from shock, fear, and curiosity, to anger or disgust. Common responses are:

How could a child know who they are or what they want at that age?

What kind of parent would let their child do something like that?

I don't care what age the person is, that's wrong, or it's a sin.

How could you allow your child to make irreversible changes to their body with hormones and surgery?

As a parent you have to set rules and boundaries for your children, protect them, and not allow them to make choices that will affect the rest of their lives.

You have failed as a parent by allowing your child to make choices that a child isn't old enough or mature enough to make.

I understand these feelings, questions, and statements. I certainly felt shock and fear. I, too, asked several of those questions—and many, many more. I had to get answers—and unlearn the myths, lies, and stereotypes previously assumed—because my son's life depended on it.

Gender identity, your internal sense of being male or female, is usually taken for granted. For most of us, our gender identity matches the body we were born in. It can be very difficult for people to understand what it means to be transgender, or to understand any experience that is different from their own.

I've come to understand that most people *think* they know what it means to be transgender, but more often than not, their understanding is flawed. Many fail to understand that gender identity is permanently developed in the brain and not directly related to your sex organs. Being transgender is not a choice or a decision—it is a medical condition that nobody would choose to have.

Imagine being born with a medical condition that you could not control and you did nothing to cause. Imagine that because this medical condition causes so much pain and suffering, almost half of the people with this condition attempt suicide. Imagine that rather than receiving empathy, support, and compassion for your medical condition, you received rejection, harassment, discrimination, and acts of violence against you. To top it off, imagine that there were no laws to protect you from this injustice.

My son's struggle to understand, accept, and *simply be who he is* nearly cost him his life. Forty-one percent of transgender people attempt suicide. My son is part of that shocking statistic. He has come a long way since those days, but it has not been easy, and the challenges are not over for him, or for us.

In this story, we hope you will relate to us and recognize that we're an intelligent, loving family, trying to do our best. We're the neighbors next door, your childhood pals, your work colleagues or former fellow classmates—we might hang out, reminisce, laugh together, and be friends.

My husband and I have been married for twenty-four years. We're smart, hardworking, caring people who love each other and

our family very much. When we were younger, we put ourselves through school and earned our master's degrees. We worked hard in our professions, climbing the corporate ladder, and doing our best to support our families. We've both served in public office in various capacities because we believe in serving and supporting our schools and community. We both volunteer and contribute generously of our time and money.

When we weren't busy working or cheering on our two kids at the various events and activities they participated in, we'd hang out with family, friends or neighbors laughing over a beer, a glass of wine, or cup of coffee. When our children were little, I was blessed with the opportunity and made the choice to put my career on hold so that I could stay home with them. Our kids also benefitted and thrived in daycares when it was needed.

We did all the things we thought responsible parents were supposed to do to raise healthy, happy, successful children. We made many choices and sacrifices, which we believed were the right thing to do at the time. We sought help and guidance along the way because we knew we weren't born with all the answers. We are ordinary, occasionally boring, occasionally hilarious, average people.

I wish we could tell our story in a way that first introduced you to our family and our amazing son, Drew, without you knowing he is transgender. If our story could play out from the beginning, I'm certain you would feel the pain, the heartbreak, and the struggles along with us. You too would experience the unthinkable and go on a desperate search for answers while trying to save and sup-

port somebody you love with your whole being. You would learn what we learned, and face the choices and decisions that we faced. Maybe, you would make the same choices.

For some people, their religious or moral understanding trumps all arguments, love, and compassion to the contrary. They feel compelled to exercise judgment that no one can challenge. So we won't.

For everyone else, we hope you can read our story with an open mind.

We Can Be a Bridge

One of the reasons we are telling our story is because we can help people understand in another way. We can be a bridge. You may not relate to or understand the transgender issue, but you can possibly relate to us as people and as parents. And by connecting with us, you might come to understand something you may have never been exposed to nor had a need to learn about.

Vince and I took our gender identity for granted. Our gender identity matches the bodies we were born in, and we found it difficult to understand how our son could be different. If you asked me several years ago what it means to be transgender, I would have provided an uneducated, and possibly insensitive, response. We "fit" neatly in the boxes that society, for the most part, finds acceptable and even desirable. We were blissfully ignorant of other people's experiences because we conformed to what most people around us expected.

Invitation to Our Journey

One of the best teachers is experience. I know that when someone tries to convince me of something, I back away. It actually turns me off. In fact, I may already agree with you about something, but the act of you trying to convince me turns me off so much that I may begin to question and doubt my previous belief!

However, if I have an experience, then my mindset can be changed instantly.

Not everybody will be blessed with knowing or loving a transgender person, so not everybody will have the gift of our experience—the gift that changed our mindset.

Vince and I are sharing our family's experience. We do not intend to preach, tell you what to believe, or “convert” anybody. That would send me running in the opposite direction, and no doubt it could do the same for others. In telling our story, we're simply inviting you along as we discovered and further explored our beliefs. This experience has changed us, and we're inviting you to experience our journey.

Because We Had to Learn

We have gained so many incredible gifts as a result of life events that we never would have chosen for our family. There was little time for self-pity and questioning why. We had to jump in, open our hearts and minds, and learn what we needed to learn. We weren't able to control or change the situation. Being transgender is not a choice for our son; it's an inherent part of who he is, and has been since the day he was born.

Since I learned what it means to be transgender, I now look at all people differently. I now look at others the way I hope they would look at me or my child. I'm able to look for goodness in others and find the many things we share in common. From that place, I'm able to open my heart and decide what I can do differently to support and validate or affirm, rather than judge.

Learning my daughter is really my son ironically taught me who *I am* and who I want to be. My son's transition was medical and social. My transition was somewhat social, but mostly spiritual. This has undoubtedly been a spiritual growth experience for me. I now see what connects all of us. I feel a oneness and a shared experience with all of humanity.

Every one of us matters. And every one of us has the power to make a difference, befriend and support one another, and change the world.

All my life I lived as a popular, accepted, and successful person. I was secure with myself; confident. Yet, when I learned I had a transgender child, my world as I had always known it turned upside down. I became frightened; fearful that if I told the truth—that my son is transgender—people would judge or criticize me or my son. I experienced what it feels like to be different; to not fit in, not be accepted or understood. Whether my fears were real or perceived, it didn't matter. Fear, in and of itself, is paralyzing.

Not knowing who is and isn't safe to confide in is part of the quandary. You can't look at somebody and know whether that person is an ally, somebody you can confide in without judgment. If it's a friend, you don't always know if they will remain your friend,

or gossip behind your back and quietly drop out of your life. I came to understand what the term “safe space” means. I came to realize how many things I took for granted, because I lived a “privileged” life.

I’m not proud of the fact that I experienced fear and insecurity. Why should I care what other people think? What do I have to be afraid of? I’m not a teenager struggling to get through adolescence, yearning to fit in and be accepted by my peers. I am an adult now; a successful, well established one at that.

But I do need to care. I need to care for my son’s safety and well-being. Violence, harassment, discrimination and rejection of transgender people are dangerously real. Needless disclosure would expose my son and could inadvertently put him in harm’s way. The statistics of murder, violence, and hate crimes against the trans community are horrifying. Sixty-one percent are victims of physical assault. Sixty-four percent are victims of sexual assault. Compared to the general public, trans people in the USA are approximately ten times more likely to be murdered. People who are transgender are twenty-eight percent more likely to experience physical violence than those who are gender normative.

I need to be honest about my feelings. I cannot and will not paint a picture of myself as the “perfect parent”—a fictitious, model of virtue. I was scared and insecure, and it was hard. Let me be perfectly clear, my son has always had my unconditional love and support. However, if it were possible, I might have chosen to hide from the world rather than let people know my child is transgender and deal with their potential rejection and judgment, or worse.

For me to grow through this and model the behavior I would want my children to see and embrace for themselves, it was crucial for me to confront my feelings. In order to better understand why others are uncomfortable around gender or sexual identities that differ from their own, it was vital for me to understand why I was uncomfortable, and learn how to bring about the change in myself.

Since my eyes have been opened to all that I don't know about the world and the people around me, life has become magical. The more I can accept and embrace all that I have learned, the more I can make it safe for others around me to do the same.

The story to follow may shock, sadden, anger, or challenge you. It may do all of those things. My greatest hope is that our story will also change you and inspire you to be an ally.