



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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Writing this book was possible because of countless allies and angels in our lives. We've written about many of them in the pages that follow, but there are several more that we wish to extend our deepest gratitude and thanks to:

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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



Converging on the Truth

It is time for parents to teach young people early on that in diversity there is beauty and there is strength. We all should know that diversity makes for a rich tapestry, and we must understand that all the threads of that tapestry are equal in value no matter their color.

—Maya Angelou

One night Drew came to me frightened, desperate, broken. It was a look that was all too familiar to me. A look that I knew would require my full attention and support. He needed his mom, he needed to be heard, and he needed to trust that I would know what to do. He said six powerful words: “I need to be someplace safe.”

Midway through tenth grade, Drew had begun living at home and at the Q Center as a male. He was back to wearing men’s clothing and got his hair cut short. We were using male pronouns and his preferred name “Drew” instead of his birth name. Although he wasn’t out as a male to anyone outside our family or the Q Center, he could feel things already starting to turn around and get better.

He felt ready to share his identity with others.

Others; however, were not as accepting and understanding. Life started to feel overwhelming again. He felt that no one really saw him as a guy—and he feared they never would. It began to take its toll on him. Even with countless hours of therapy and numerous medications, his anxiety wasn't getting any better. It became too much for him to handle.

Drew had given up hope and felt he'd rather die than continue the struggle. Thankfully, he recognized this emotional place and what he was contemplating. He remembered the key words to say when he came to me that night. "I need to be someplace safe." I knew exactly what he meant. After a quick consult with Drew's therapist, I had a plan.

I let Vince know what was going on, and then I took Drew to the pediatric emergency room at Golisano Children's Hospital. Vince and I both knew not to argue when Drew said he felt more comfortable going with just mom.

It was a miracle break-through that Drew was able to come to us at all. I don't know if this was Drew's first suicidal ideation since his attempt nearly two years earlier, but this is exactly what we wanted to happen when the thoughts came back. Drew was fighting along with us, not hiding from us.

Hospital and social workers will want to pay attention here.

Golisano Children's Hospital got it right. The human experience there was life-changing for Drew, as well as for Vince and me. We learned over the next few days (and weeks) how important it was to embrace the discovery process that was going on within Drew. We, as parents, would watch our child truly open up. Finally.

A social worker assigned to take care of Drew was an angel in disguise. She performed the intake interview and assessed Drew's state and reason for feeling suicidal. Drew looked to me to answer the questions that were difficult for him. I fumbled for the right words as I tried to explain that although Drew is a girl, he feels more like a boy than a girl. I explained that he had been living as a boy at home for more than a month but had just started expressing himself this way to a few friends and others outside our home.

The social worker knew all about transgender youth. She was so supportive and knowledgeable. She immediately "got" the male pronouns and called Drew by his preferred name. Drew was visibly relieved that we got to speak with someone who actually knew what he was talking about. Soon he relaxed and answered questions himself, rather than look to me. For me, it was so comforting, consoling, and satisfying to see that my son was able to speak and be heard, when the person he was speaking to was able to see him and affirm who he really was. Who knew we would find an ally like this in an emergency room?

Vince and I had never used the name "Drew" outside of our home before. I was uncomfortable and fearful of how this would all play out. This particular social worker was one of many allies and angels placed along our path to help us. She informed the rest of the staff of Drew's preferred name and pronoun usage, and the staff took it very seriously. I didn't have to educate anyone who interacted with Drew and be the corrector of pronouns—an experience that always made Drew shrink and withdraw. I didn't have

to advocate for my son with every new nurse and doctor who saw him. Instead, I was free to just be Drew's mom.

Drew responded well and things improved quickly. It was the first time Drew was actually accepted by the outside world and it seemed to give him hope. He was delighted to hear his name, a name he had chosen. I remember the friendly staff person who would arrive with his breakfast tray and cheerfully say, "Good morning, Andrew. It's going to be a good day today. I hope you enjoy your breakfast!" The lab technicians who collected Drew's blood, the nurses who tended to him day and night, even the kind men and women who cleaned his room and emptied his trash—they all called him Andrew and used male pronouns.

It's important to note that the actions of the doctors and staff conveyed the message that a respected authority acknowledges and validates the basic transgender human condition. Up until this point, validation had only come to us from the Internet, the Q Center, and books.

For Vince and me, it was a pivotal time to watch others affirm our son—using his preferred name and male pronouns. We were able to observe the effect it had on Drew. He arrived at the hospital feeling hopeless, thinking the world would never accept him for who he was, and wanting to end his life because it was too hard to pretend to be somebody he was not. He arrived shaking, crying, head down, and unable to look even me in the eye. I watched the tension, fear, and pain disappear as Drew began to relax. It paralleled his first day at the Q Center.

As we observed Drew's reaction toward the simple acts of others affirming him, we realized that our job as parents extended far beyond providing a safe home. It required us to support him in getting to a place where others would see and know him as a male. He needed to be who he truly is, and we needed to help make that happen.

In a private conversation, the social worker told me about her experience in Philadelphia working with transgender youth. Her words added an ingredient to my growth; she validated what I already knew intuitively—that my son's condition was very real and very serious—but there was also help and hope. She told me about an annual conference in Philadelphia that provided comprehensive education on transgender issues, free of charge.

Drew spent four days at Golisano Children's Hospital waiting for a bed to become available at a nearby psychiatric hospital. We were insistent that Drew be sent to Four Winds; a healthcare facility we were already familiar with and personally give two thumbs up.

The trip there was an uncomfortable three-hour ambulance ride, but I was grateful I could ride with Drew. It's a surreal experience to sit in an ambulance with my son and look back through the rear window to see Vince, alone and following in our car. Two years earlier, Vince and I were following Billy in the ambulance after Billy's suicide attempt. I remember the worry and hopelessness we felt on that long and silent ride. As I looked back at Vince, I thought how lonely and scared he must feel. I looked down at Drew who was lying with his head in my lap, holding my

hand, and thought he, too, must feel lonely and scared. *We will get through this*, I thought. *Four Winds helped Billy, it will help Drew.*

The intake experience at Four Winds was just as we had expected. Adam, the therapist who interviewed the three of us not long after we arrived, was knowledgeable and skillful when asking Drew questions. Drew was open and engaged in the conversation. I smiled inside.

While at Golisano's, Vince coached Drew to be an active participant in his own health and wellness. Vince used the example of Drew's last pair of eye glasses. Drew had noted how good his prescription was. Vince pointed out that the lenses were so good because Drew took his eye examination seriously—something only he could do. Drew's previous glasses lacked visual clarity because an impatient Drew didn't see the importance of taking the time to select the correct lens during the exam.

Drew took the advice and was now vested in the process at Four Winds. Adam also made it easy. He was able to relate with Drew, interpret his feelings, and repeat them back accurately. Their dialogue was genuine, honest, and clear. It was fascinating to watch.

In the past, Drew would become so frustrated whenever Vince and I tried to verbalize what we thought he was feeling. I think it pleased Drew that we could be there to witness the discourse between him and Adam, to see it firsthand.

Over the course of his two-week stay, Drew was feeling validated, and I too walked away with a new confidence, building on the experience at Golisano Children's Hospital.

It was hard for me and Vince to accept that we couldn't help Drew ourselves. We had to depend on experts outside our family, just as we had with Billy. We did the best we could to select the professionals, programs, and facilities to help us and our children, but ultimately, we had to turn it over to the experts and let go. The Serenity Prayer reminds us of this every day as we pray for the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

We left Four Winds with something we didn't expect or even know was a possibility—a formal diagnosis of Gender Identity Disorder (GID), the term used by psychologists and physicians to describe persons who experience significant gender dysphoria (discontent with the sex they were assigned at birth and/or the gender roles associated with that sex). It was as if Drew became officially transgender. For me and Vince, it was certainly easier to explain to people now that we had a formal, medical diagnosis.

The DSM-V, the newest edition of the psychiatric diagnostic manual, which was released in May 2013, stopped labeling transgender people as “disordered.” The DSM-V replaced the diagnostic term, “gender identity disorder,” with the term, “gender dysphoria.” Based on standards set by the DSM-V, individuals will now be diagnosed with gender dysphoria for displaying, “a marked incongruence between one's experienced/expressed gender and assigned gender.”

Drew never returned to his classes after he came home from Four Winds. The high school graciously provided homebound instruction for the remainder of tenth grade.

Drew continued to attend the regular LGBT youth meetings at the Q Center, but also began attending the monthly TransYouth group meetings. These sessions taught Drew about gender identity and how it is completely different from sexual orientation. He also got to know many other transgender youth just like him.

After an initial meeting at the Q Center, Drew told us about an interaction with a guy he met there. Drew had asked if the guy used to be a girl. This was back before he knew the language and what was appropriate, offensive, or insensitive. Now, the notion ‘used to be a girl’ doesn’t make sense or even sound right.

The Q Center is a safe space and Drew’s language problem was overcome with time. What’s great is that the Q Center has programming that helps kids learn the vocabulary and facts. Drew finally started connecting the dots in his life. We did, too.

Although he had always felt like a boy, Drew was able to live with a female body because it wasn’t an issue before puberty. In his mind, he was attracted to more boyish things. He always wore male clothes. It was never a big deal. When puberty hit, the problem then became acute because now things were happening that definitely contradicted his sense of who he was. His body was changing and betraying him. Drew realized that he was transgender.

Gradually, Vince and I made friends with adults at the Q Center. We found it was a safe place for us, too. LGBT, much less transgender, was all new to us. It was scary in a “fear of the unknown” sort of way. The parents, staff, and volunteers at the Q Center were excellent supports for us. After Drew came out

as transgender, we started attending the TransParent group at the Q Center, a support group for parents of transgender and gender non-conforming youth.

At our first TransParent meeting, we met Karen and Jason. What struck me about this couple was how much they embraced their child and their child's gender identity. They were quintessential role models. They taught us how far we could go, how supportive we could be, and how important it is to advocate for your child. Their relationship with their child was beautiful. A lot of our fears and uncertainty were counterbalanced by Karen and Jason's positive experience. We saw a place of normalcy and true acceptance in our future—hope beyond our current fears of the unknown.

Months later, when the Q Center's program coordinator left the area, Karen and I became co-leaders of the TransParent group—a responsibility we still share. I am committed to being there for other parents, as Karen and others had been there for me. For a while our group was very small, but it has since steadily grown.

The Q Center has played an important role in our lives, providing a safe place for our son while serving as a catalyst for our own growth. While connecting us with friends and resources, the Q Center also merges merriment and a playful spirit. A beautiful example of this is the Pride Prom, a formal dance put on each year by the Q Center.

At the Pride Prom, kids can attend with whomever they want. If a guy wants to bring a guy, he brings a guy. If a girl wants to bring a girl, she brings a girl. They can wear whatever they want

and express their identity. Many kids find their high school dances restrictive and intolerant. Recall before Drew's transition, he was not allowed to enter a dance because he didn't wear a dress.

In the three years Drew has been attending the Q Center, we have seen that the kids really look forward to the Pride Prom. It's a very good thing. Drew's first experience was priceless.

When Drew first told us about the prom, he asked if he could get a suit. This was after years of never wanting to go shopping for clothes. I remember the moms of Drew's friends often telling me how lucky I was that my child didn't live at the mall and didn't constantly beg me to take him shopping for new clothes, shoes, jewelry, make-up, and hair accessories. Don't get me wrong, I believe in expressing and being grateful for what you have, rather than dwelling and yearning for what you don't have. However, it never felt right to be grateful that Drew avoided malls. It wasn't that he was content with what he had; rather, he was hiding from the world. I always felt like we were missing a normal, healthy experience with our teenager.

So here I was being presented with a request to get a suit. And what did we do? We went shopping! I cried in JC Penney. Drew was trying on suits and having so much fun. He would come out of the changing room and look at himself proudly in the three-way mirror. He modeled and showed himself off. He was really excited. He struck pose after pose and just strutted around, "Hmmm, should I wear a vest? Let me try this vest on. I think I like this vest. Should I do suspenders?" He loved what he saw in the mirror, and so did I.

I was crying because for years Drew wouldn't look in a mirror. He hated the mirror. He had such dysphoria; what he saw in the mirror caused him such pain. It makes sense now because someone presenting as a girl was reflecting back at him and this was not what he felt like inside. When he saw himself in a suit, the guy in the mirror finally matched what he felt inside. He liked what he saw. He saw a guy trying on all these different suits and it felt right. By the way, he looks darn good in a suit!

I can't say the excursion all went perfectly, though. Drew still had a female body. Unlike a male's body, he was curvy, and his shorter stature made it more difficult to find pants that fit him right. Drew wore a binder to flatten and conceal his chest. His binder showed through some of the shirts he tried on, so he had to make adjustments. Overall, however, it was a joyful day—especially for the mom who had been waiting fifteen years for an occasion like this!

Fast forward to prom night when Vince and I dropped off Drew. The prom was at a hall in an unfamiliar part of town, but we were learning to let go and trust more. We appreciated how the staff at the Q Center knows how vulnerable the kids are and they are very protective. We returned to pick Drew up just before the prom was about to end. We texted him so that he knew we were waiting. We saw him saying his goodbyes, hugging at least twenty people. What parent's heart wouldn't be warmed by such a sight?

As he walked toward the car, I watched him. I was just fascinated. He seemed so relaxed, confident, and happy. Could this be the same boy that was so broken only a few short months ago? The

boy who couldn't hold his head up, couldn't look anyone in the eye? Now, he walked tall and proudly.

I looked a bit more closely. He had a crown. I remember asking Vince, "Do you see that? He's got a crown. What do you think that crown means? Why's he wearing a crown? Are they all wearing party hats?" I looked around thinking they just put party hats on, but nobody else was wearing a hat or a crown. "What do you think the crown means?" He also had all these beads around his neck. He had so many beads it looked like Mardi Gras. He had so many, you would think he would fall over. The other kids didn't have the beads. What was up with that?

He and a friend finally got in the car. Half-jokingly, but silently hoping, I had to ask, "So what's the crown? Are you prom king?" Drew said, "Yeaaaaah!" and got this big smile on his face.

I later learned the prom organizers gave each of the youth two strings of beads when they arrived at the prom. They were each instructed to put one strand around the neck of the person they chose as prom king and one around the neck of the person they chose for prom queen.

I let my understanding of what had happened sink in. All of those beads around my son's neck had been placed there by his friends; by the dozens of peers in attendance who chose him to be their prom king.

It's painful to think back to the time when he was so lost and alone. He didn't have many friends. He didn't want to be around anybody. Now, he was voted prom king by his friends and other kids he met there that night. I still get a warm flood of goose-

bumps when I think of that moment. As a mom, I am overcome with feelings of love and gratitude for those young people at the prom who lifted up my son when they placed their beads around his neck, and to the many allies and angels who led us to this place.

What is Transgender?

When Vince and I first learned that our son's years of depression and anxiety might stem from an inner struggle with his gender identity, I rushed to learn all I could. I performed Google searches, watched and read personal accounts of transgender people, sought transgender studies, read every book I could get my hands on, and consulted with doctors, professionals and experts. Here's what I found.

Essentially, transgender people challenge traditional ideas about gender and defy social expectations of how they should look, act, or identify, based on their birth sex. Transgender is an umbrella term used to encompass individuals, behaviors, and groups whose gender identity or gender expression do not conform to society's expectations of what it means to be male or female. Many identities fall under the transgender umbrella, including transsexuals, cross dressers, drag queens and drag kings.

Transgender is often shortened to trans. Trans or trans* is an abbreviation that began as a way to be more inclusive or concise in reference to the different identities that could be referenced by using the term. The asterisk implies that trans* encompasses transgender, transsexual, and other transitional identities challenging the gender binary.

Transsexuals are people who experience an intense, persistent, and long-term feeling that their body and assigned sex do not match their gender identity. Such individuals desire to change their bodies to bring them into alignment with their gender identities.

The term transsexual comes from the medical establishment and many people do not like this term. I've been told it can be an "ouch" word and is not a term I should impose on people. However, there are some people who prefer the term transsexual, such as my son.

As I tried to understand all I was reading, my head was spinning. There was a lot of terminology, much of which didn't make sense to me at the time, and some of which made me uncomfortable.

At first, I got hung up on phrases like, "challenging traditional ideas" and "defying social expectations," because to me, those words implied a *chosen* behavior of an individual to defy or rebel against society. This clearly was not a chosen behavior on my son's part. I know this and I can tell you this with absolute certainty that he did not choose to be trans—nobody would deliberately choose such a hard life in our society.

At awareness training and workshops, we often start out by explaining the difference between sexual orientation and gender identity, and then define each of the following separately: birth sex, gender identity and gender expression. When these terms were broken down for me, it became easier to understand and explain them to others.

Before expounding further, I'm going to oversimplify in a non-scientific, non-textbook way just as somebody once explained to me. They said, "Terri, your child has a male brain inside of a female body."

Many of us think "penis = boy and vagina = girl." Most of the time this turns out to be the case, but not always.

Numerous studies have confirmed the long-held suspicion about the brains of males and females. They're not the same. Scientists now know that sex hormones begin to exert their influence during development of the fetus. I won't bore you with the studies and the brain imaging technology used to capture and analyze the differences, but if you want to confirm for yourself, the findings are out there.

What I had always assumed; however, was that a penis and a male brain came as a matched set, just like a vagina and a female brain were supposed to be a matched set. It does not always turn out that way.

A child can be born with a variety of unexpected, uncommon or undesirable traits. For example, an extra finger or missing toe. Similarly, a child can be born with missing organs, a malformed heart, an undescended testicle, a missing testicle, or a variety of other unusual traits, which some may call "birth defects." I personally don't like to imply that being born transgender is a birth defect, although my son refers to his condition as a birth defect. I respect that certain terminology can influence reactions—what may be offensive to some can be acceptable to others—and I offer this example with the hope that it helps clarify my point.

My child was born with a male brain inside of a female body. There are different theories and studies that explain why and how this happens. Briefly, some believe a hormone imbalance during fetal development causes an individual's gender identity (what is in their brain) to not match their biological sex (what is between their legs.)

At first, these concepts of mismatched gender identity and biological sex were difficult for me to grasp because I had always lived in a body that was aligned with how I identified. When I was born, I had a vagina and I was labeled a girl. This wasn't a problem because I always felt "like a girl," dressed "like a girl," acted "like a girl" and was happy to be a girl. My sex and gender identity were a matched set. They were aligned. For most of the population, our sex and gender identity are aligned, so this can be a challenging concept to comprehend.

I committed my time and energy to understand so I could best support my son. The reality is I could spend a lifetime studying the causes, diagnostic criteria, and variations, but I had to make decisions now. There was enough information and research to convince me that being transgender was a legitimate condition.

What is someone's sex? What is someone's gender? What is the difference between sex and gender? Think in terms of what we're born with versus what we learn. Everyone is born with a birth sex, and everyone develops a gender identity.

It is helpful to grasp a couple key concepts:

- The distinction between birth sex, gender identity and gender expression, and

- The distinction between sexual orientation and gender identity.

Birth Sex

Your birth sex could be male, female, or intersex (having both female and male sexual characteristics). A label of male or female is assigned at birth based on the appearance of external genitalia, and this is the sex designation that appears on birth certificates and other legal documents. Chromosomes are another way of labeling birth sex, although most of us don't have our chromosomes tested and verified at birth. A child born with a penis is assigned the birth sex male (and is assumed to have two distinct sex chromosomes, XY.) A child born with a vagina is assigned the birth sex female (and is assumed to have two X chromosomes.) Intersex people have various combinations of sex chromosomes, hormone levels, and genitalia.

Birth sex refers to the physiological and anatomical characteristics that a person is born with or that develop with physical maturity, including internal and external reproductive organs, chromosomes, hormones, body shape, and genitals. Birth sex is also referred to as "assigned sex" or "biological sex."

Gender Identity

Your gender identity is your internal sense of being male, female or gender non-binary. Gender identity is "between your ears" whereas birth sex is "between your legs."

Gender identity, a person's own understanding of themselves in terms of categories like boy or girl, man or woman, transgender and others, is how a person feels inside—what they believe themselves to be.

An individual understands their gender identity much earlier than their sexuality. By ages two and three, children begin noticing the difference between being a boy and being a girl, and they start to identify with one or the other. Some studies show gender-typed play begins as early as eighteen months.

Gender Expression

Gender expression is behaviors and lifestyle choices that convey something about a person's gender identity, or that others interpret as meaning something about their gender identity, including clothing, hairstyle, mannerisms, communication patterns, social roles, etc. We often categorize gender expression as being masculine, feminine, or androgynous.

Your DNA doesn't determine how you style your hair or what clothes you like to wear.

Gender expression is not binary (that is, it is neither exclusively masculine nor feminine) and it is not necessarily aligned with birth sex or gender identity. For example, a man can be masculine or feminine just as a woman can be masculine or feminine. Furthermore, all people can fall somewhere on the spectrum between masculine and feminine, and where they fall can change from day to day.

Sexual Orientation

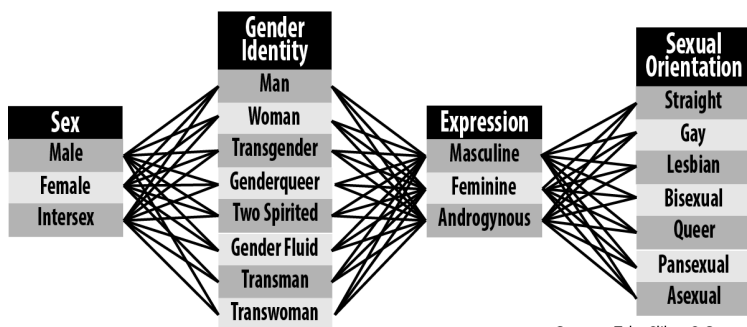
Your sexual orientation equates to your physical, sexual and/or romantic attraction to others. It is who you are attracted to or who you love. Sexual orientation describes an enduring pattern of attraction and the inclination or capacity to develop intimate, emotional, and sexual relationships with other people. Sexual orientation is usually quantified in terms of gender—both an individual's own gender and the gender(s) of the people to whom that person is attracted to. Categories for sexual orientation include straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, pansexual, asexual, and questioning, among many others. These categories, like all of this terminology, are constantly evolving.

I ask you to break away from what might be a tendency to look at birth sex, gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation as binary—that somebody is either male or female, a man or a woman, masculine or feminine, straight or gay. The components of sexual and gender identity are not binary and are not easily defined by checking one of only two boxes, although many of us have been conditioned to view them as binary.

I also ask you to consider that the components just discussed (birth sex, gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation) are not aligned or associated with each other in any particular groupings. One should not assume that a person born male would naturally identify as a man, be masculine, and be attracted to women. Likewise, one should not assume a person born female would identify as a woman, be feminine, and be attracted to men. For cultural, political, religious, and personal reasons some might

want this to be true, but it does not match the reality of the human population. Men and women can be masculine, feminine or somewhere in between. A man can be attracted to men or women or both, and a woman can be attracted to men or women or both. A person can be born male but identify as a woman and vice versa.

The diagram below indicates many, but not all, of the possibilities.



Courtesy Tyler Sliker, Q Center



Turning Point as Parents

As I considered my story, I found an odd paradox: that the power of the story came from the depth of the self-disclosure.

—Donna Rose

Drew had been patient with therapy, testing medications for depression and anxiety, and allowing us, as his parents, to help him. When Drew began to seriously consider and ultimately accepted that he is transgender, Vince and I owed it to him to educate ourselves on what being transgender means.

It wasn't easy, though. We had the same limiting beliefs many people have, who have never heard of or met a transgender person. Remember the questions from our introduction:

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

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

I don't care what age the person is, that's wrong.

As parents on this journey, it was vital to separate the outside world and our own insecurities from our child's needs. For a period of time, we insulated ourselves from the harsh judgmental voices of others. We didn't need their skeptical, fearful commentary influencing us. Although we were also ignorant about gender identity disorder, we knew it would do no good to listen to their input—no matter how well-intentioned they might seem. We needed to immerse ourselves in research, as well as consult doctors and experienced specialists. Allowing Drew to live safely as a male in our home throughout this process was a huge step toward discovering and affirming his gender for ourselves.

We had three key questions about being transgender. The first was, "Can this actually happen where the biological sex does not match gender identity?" When we understood and accepted that this mismatch actually happens, we had to ask the next question, "Can a child know he is transgender at age fifteen?" Again, when we were satisfied that, yes, a child's gender identity is formed in the first few years of life, the next question was, "How do we know if *our* child is transgender and needs to transition for a happy, healthy life?" After all, not every gender non-conforming child is transgender or needs to transition.

Vince and I are engineers. We're the geeky, logical, fact-driven, list-making, science-oriented types, and we dove into these questions looking for solid answers. Silently, I prayed that we would find something to disprove what I intuitively knew was true. I was hoping that I would find an answer amidst the research that would let me keep my little girl.

God, let it be anything else. I can handle and support my child through anything, but please not this. How will he get through this? How will I? These thoughts consumed me.

We didn't want this. We went through the stages—from shock to denial to damage control, and finally to acceptance. In hindsight, gaining a son is a beautiful thing and we are grateful and know how lucky we are to have him. But for a time, we grasped desperately to the child we thought we were losing.

Our research and professional consultations gave us the answers and confidence we needed to know what we had ultimately come to accept—that our son was transgender. It was real, and in our son's case, transition was urgent. We needed to move forward.

While we had the medical and scientific answers we needed, it was the Donna Rose book, *Wrapped in Blue*, that gave us emotional insight. Donna Rose demystified what it meant to be transgender. Her words helped me to understand her feelings and her experience living in the wrong body. I could feel her pain—not just the pain of being a woman trapped in a man's body, but the pain from years of trying to deny it, trying to be somebody she wasn't, and trying not to hurt the people she loved. Her bravery in telling such a personal story is commendable. I'm grateful for her courage because her words helped me better understand what my son was feeling. It helped me better understand my role in either perpetuating or alleviating my son's pain.

Donna Rose revealed her struggles in a way that I was able to connect with her as a real person every bit as deserving of love and compassion as anybody else. That connection enabled me to see

through my social, educational, and other filters, and ultimately see gender identity as separate from one's genitalia.

We are in a time of increasing acceptance of transgender people, but it wasn't always that way; *Wrapped in Blue* encapsulated the choice before me, as a parent of a transgender son. Donna Rose missed out on a significant portion of her life as a woman because family and social norms didn't provide for transition during her childhood. I soon learned that many transgender children do not survive to be adults. I became committed to supporting my son's transition. I didn't want him to miss another day of living his life, comfortable in his own skin.

Perhaps the most important lesson I learned from Donna Rose was how it feels to be transgender and not be able to express your identity freely. I developed the compassion and empathy that I'm embarrassed Vince and I didn't have from the beginning.

We became more committed to putting aside our fears and reaching out. A friend suggested we attend a chapter meeting of PFLAG, the original ally organization founded in 1972, which advocates in various ways for the LGBT community.

Walking into my first PFLAG meeting, I felt nervous. Who would be there and would I fit in? I was afraid I'd be judged. I was afraid that nobody at the PFLAG meeting would have any experience with a transgender child. Surely everybody there would be families and friends of lesbians and gays—after all, PFLAG stands for Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. Was I going to have to educate everybody at the meeting about what it

means to be transgender and the challenges our family had been encountering?

If Vince was nervous, he didn't show it. He accompanied me to this meeting. We were supporting each other as we always have throughout our entire marriage. Vince is always strong, even when he is as scared and as clueless as I am.

It took all of about thirty seconds before I realized I was in the right place; I was accepted, warmly welcomed, and understood. Being at this PFLAG meeting was like being at my first Families Anonymous meeting. I was in a room full of people just like me. Although all of our stories were different, we shared a common, deep love for our children, and an understanding of the difficult challenges they faced. In one way or another, each of our children had been bullied, rejected, and discriminated against. Each of us watched as they were unfairly denied experiences or opportunities that their brothers or sisters were privileged to enjoy. Each of us shared different stories of our children's paths to acceptance. I felt a strong friendship and mutual respect for everyone in the room—and it took a matter of minutes to feel that way. I was in a good place.

Our local PFLAG chapter was small and eventually folded because the previous leaders were moving on. I considered stepping up to keep the chapter alive, but I was already co-leader of the TransParent group at the Q Center. Although the number of PFLAG meetings we attended was probably less than a dozen, the friendships, resources, and opportunities gained were instrumental on our journey. Vince and I proudly marched in our first PRIDE

Parade with other members of PFLAG and we were honored to help carry the PFLAG banner.

PFLAG introduced us to a dear friend who is now like a second mother to my son. In fact, Drew actually calls her mom. While I might otherwise feel hurt at the thought of my son calling somebody else Mom, she has shown him all the kindness, compassion, acceptance, and support of a mom and has treated him like her own child.

PFLAG also connected us with another friend who referred us to the LGBT Resource Center at Syracuse University. There, we were invited to borrow a video, *Call me Kade*, which chronicled the life of a female to male transgender youth. I couldn't get there to pick up the video so I asked Vince to get it. Vince was very uncomfortable going someplace new and losing his anonymity. One of the challenges we had to overcome was the fear of the unknown, the social outcome, each time we outed ourselves as the parents of a transgender youth. Not yet ready to lose his anonymity, Vince did what I would expect. He searched the Internet until he found the video. It was older and very hard to find, but he did.

Call Me Kade was another turning point in our acceptance of Drew as our son. It chronicled the transformation of someone just like Drew—a transgender boy of similar age and circumstances. Suddenly most of the scariness of not knowing what was happening to Drew or that life was somehow ruined melted away. Kade and his family had put themselves out into the public so others like me and my family could learn and grow.

Philadelphia Trans Health Conference

Although Drew knew we were there for him, it was important to show, through our actions, that our entire family was in it with both feet. We didn't know everything he was experiencing and feeling, but we were committed to learning what we needed to learn so that we could best support him and advocate for him.

Four separate people recommended that we attend the Philadelphia Trans Health Conference (PTHC): the social worker at Golisano Children's Hospital, the program coordinator at the Q Center, and our new friends, Karen and Jason. Four people who had already made such a positive difference in our lives couldn't be wrong, so we made our reservations and told Drew to check out the workshops for teens. Vince and I signed up for every workshop for parents and allies, as well as several designed for educators—splitting duties when two were scheduled at the same time. Attending this conference as a family was a way to show Drew he was not alone on this journey of discovery.

I remember looking at all the workshop titles and descriptions and getting very excited. There was a workshop for everything: hormones, parenting perspectives, transitioning in school, topics of significance for female to male transition, name changes, binding, top surgery, legal issues, and so much more. There were workshops about topics that affected Drew and our family immediately, and workshops for issues that were way down the road.

It wasn't until I got to the conference that I realized how much more there was for us beyond the workshops. I knew that going

there was the right thing to do and was important, but I had no idea how much so until I actually experienced it.

By the time we attended the conference in May of 2011, Drew had already been living as a male in our home for six months. These were six intense months with a lot of growth, learning, and progress on his transition. He had been wearing a binder and presenting as a male. We had the pronouns down and told all our family and friends about Drew and his transition. We had seen a pediatric endocrinologist and Drew started hormone therapy (testosterone.) We had done and learned so much, that by the time May rolled around, I think we developed the attitude that we knew it all and didn't need to go to the conference. The reality at the conference proved otherwise! We were just scratching the surface; we were just starting. Our experience at the conference was like drinking water from a fire hose.

Finding Hope at PTHC

For three days, the conference focused on everything transgender. As much as we had been immersing ourselves in reading and learning all we could, we were limited by what was available in Central New York as far as doctors, therapists, and professionals who had experience working with transgender people and their families. In our community, the number of transgender people and parents who have children who transitioned is small.

Everything we could need was there for us at the conference. It had a smorgasbord of specialists. You want to talk to surgeons? There's a whole bunch of them. You want to talk to people who

have already had surgery? You got it. Therapists. Educators. Lawyers. Parents. Children. Clergymen. We met all of these people and heard firsthand about their experiences. All of our questions were answered; this time not just from textbooks and research, but by sitting and talking to real people, face-to-face.

Despite me being an engineer, always seeking facts through research, I also seek insight. I need to see, feel, and have an experience. That's how I learn and that's how I ultimately make decisions. I don't let my intuition and gut guide me completely, but listening to people, looking someone in the eye, and hearing about their journey enables me to understand and envision what's right or wrong for me.

At the Q Center, I met a few other transgender people and their families, but at the conference I got to meet hundreds and see thousands. I met people of all ages, in all stages of transition, and at all stages of their life. There were people already transitioned for many years who were in their twenties and thirties, out of college, in loving relationships, married, or gainfully employed. Many were living what I consider happy, healthy lives, and I became filled with hope.

The PTHC's gift to me was priceless: I gained another robust picture of what the future could look like for my son. For fifteen years, I envisioned a future for my daughter. Those images were now lost to me and for a while I had nothing to replace them with. I didn't know what my child's future would look like. The people I met at the PTHC provided me a realistic, hopeful picture of the future that awaited my son.

How TYFA has helped

My first PTHC conference was largely shaped by an organization called TYFA, which stands for Trans Youth Family Allies. TYFA's founding members are parents of transgender youth who came together first to support each other. They now support hundreds of families. TYFA empowers children and families by partnering with educators, service providers, and communities to develop supportive environments in which gender may be expressed and respected. TYFA envisions a society free of suicide and violence in which all children are respected and celebrated.

At the conference, TYFA offered several workshops and an opportunity to connect with other parents. Many of those parents had children who transitioned before kindergarten.

I will never forget the first TYFA workshop I attended: *Minimizing the Top Ten Fears of Raising a Transgender/Gender Variant Child*.

One of the first things the executive president of TYFA shared as she voiced her early fears was: "Who is going to love my child?" Tears filled my eyes immediately. She said something that I had felt, but was afraid to ever say out loud. My love for Drew is so big that I don't know how to express it in words. I know how much love, goodness, kindness, and wonderfulness is within him, and I had this same fear. I often thought to myself, *Who will love my child? He is so deserving of love. Who will love him the way he deserves to be loved?* I was crying, and we were only minutes into the program.

The workshop was lively. More than a hundred parents started to raise their hands and share their fears. Just like my first Families

Anonymous and PFLAG meetings, I felt an immediate sense of connection, knowing others in the room had similar fears, questions, and experiences. Although we were all at different stages of our personal journeys, I now had a larger community. I was not alone.

I saw myself six months earlier in some people; brand new to the transgender issue and just learning. Some, although managing to get to the conference, were still in a state of doubt, disbelief, or denial. I saw people where we were then—several months into the journey. I had a sense of already knowing, accepting, and understanding what it means to be transgender.

I also got to see parents who were years down the road where their child had already transitioned. I could see we had an enormous responsibility to help our son through hormones, surgeries, a name change, school accommodations, transitioning outside our home. These new friends offered advice to make things easier and avoid common mistakes.

None of these steps were simple or trivial, so the help of others who had been through them was tremendous. There was so much to consider and do. For example, the name change process alone involves many steps beyond getting it approved by a court. There's also getting a revised Social Security card, birth certificate, passport, driver's license, school documents, insurance, and medical documents. I took for granted all the places where a birth name exists.

After leaving the Philly conference, TYFA continued to provide another vital resource: its listserv, which is a community like

the Q Center, but online. TYFA's listserv is an email list that connects hundreds of families with transgender youth. People on the listserv gave me hope that our family's transition wasn't always going to be so overwhelming. People were sharing how they stepped through the process. Whenever somebody meets challenges, there is compassionate support and practical help.

My local community of parents with transgender children may be small, with roughly twenty in our TransParent group, but the TYFA listserv connects me with hundreds of other parents across the country. TYFA's listserv is a community of allies and angels, created by allies and angels.

Developed Sense of Urgency from PTHC

The Philly conference filled me with an incredible sense of urgency. Drew was still a child (although he might argue with us about this). He was still growing. He was fragile. He was learning. It became apparent to me that there was still a lot of his childhood left. At age fifteen, he had two years left in high school; it was not too late for him to create childhood memories that he could look back on happily.

We met so many people at the conference who transitioned in their thirties, forties, or fifties. They lived their childhood and young adult years in the wrong bodies. They didn't get the chance to experience their childhood as their identified gender. We had the power to help Drew experience his remaining years of high school as a male.

I felt a need to get beyond the fact that he's transgender and get the focus back on how he's just a really great teenager. He's transgender, so what? Now, let's get on with the rest of life.

It became clear that I had a role to play in this transition. Initially, our approach was that of typical parents: cautious. "Alright, let's wait and see. If after you're eighteen you want to have surgery, if you're sure you want to do this, well then, we'll talk about it."

Going to the conference helped me understand that my role in Drew's time-sensitive transition was crucial. I could help my son experience at least part of his childhood as the boy he has always been. To do this; however, I realized the initial cautious approach wasn't going to work. Through the PTHC, I also learned waiting until Drew was eighteen wasn't necessary either. At this point we all knew, without any doubt, that Drew was a boy. Why put this arbitrary line in the sand that he can't start living and being who he really is until he is eighteen? Why deny him two years or more of being comfortable in his own skin? Why deny him the ability to create memories that he can look back on and feel good about?

A Special Thanks to Chaz Bono

Chaz Bono spoke at the PTHC. I bought his book at the conference and read it before the trip was over. Reading his book and hearing his story contributed significantly to one of my major take aways from the conference—that there was still a chance for Drew to experience the latter part of his childhood as a boy.

What Chaz Bono represented to me, and one of the reasons I'm so grateful to him for sharing his story, is that he explains so

well about the loss he experienced. He, as a transgender person, never had the childhood of a boy. Some of us are old enough to remember images of the little girl, “Chastity” on the Sonny and Cher show. Those images are not how Chaz sees himself. He created such a vivid, visible example of the years he lost; years that I have the ability to help Drew keep.

My heart breaks that Chaz doesn't have any period of memories growing up, even into his thirties, of being who he really is. He shares in his book, *Transition*:

Along with going through all of the changes that have happened as a result of transitioning, I have also experienced a deep sense of loss and profound sadness for the 40 years of life I spent inside of the wrong body. In addition to the elation that I have felt while becoming the man I was always meant to be, I have had to grieve that my life is half over and I am only now feeling like a complete human being. I grieve for my lost youth, for the boy and young man that I didn't get to be, and I grieve because I will never experience what it's like to grow up as a man, only what it's like to grow old as one.

In spite of this sense of loss, which has now diminished greatly, I am more grateful than words can express for my life, and am happier and more fulfilled than I've ever been.

I so admire Chaz for his courage to share his story publicly. He speaks so honestly about his feelings. He wants to increase

awareness and help other kids have the opportunity to experience their childhood wholly, as themselves. He was brave to begin his gender transition in the public eye. By doing so, he continues to impact change and create awareness and visibility for the transgender community. As somebody who has been changed by it, I am forever grateful. His brave and unselfish actions have contributed to my awareness as a parent—helping me more quickly provide what my child needs.

Chaz helped me realize that I play a paramount role in driving Drew's transition. I don't know how long it would have taken for me to come to these realizations on my own. As well-intentioned as I am and as much as I love Drew, as much as I read every book I could get my hands on, as much as I researched every website I could find and talked to every doctor and professional I could; without meeting other people like Chaz Bono who are willing to be vulnerable and expose themselves in front of the whole world—knowing that a very large number of people are going to be critical and judgmental and mean—it could have taken me years. It's because of those stories and those people and the opportunity to meet them that I got to this place of acceptance and urgency as soon as I did.

Every day my respect grows ever stronger for those who can be so open about such personal topics, because it is so scary, so vulnerable, and so hard. It's kind of like pinning your heart on a bull's eye where people can take aim and shoot. You don't know how your story is going to be received—with empathy or with arrows. It can hurt, and yet, they do it anyway.

I recall standing in line at the conference, waiting to get my book signed by Chaz. As I watched him autograph books and take pictures, his kindness, compassion, and beautiful soul shined through. Many months later, I would hear from a mom on the TYFA listserv about how Chaz showed up at her door and surprised her young son with a visit. Chaz is a member of the Board of Transforming Families, a support group for families with gender diverse children. He's just a good person using his experience to help make a difference. I want to be like that.