

February 2, 2020

Jody Davis, RN, LISW-S, board member of Equality Ohio

Back in May, 2019 I testified on behalf of Ohio Senate Bill 11 to the members of the Senate Judiciary Committee.

Today I am pleased to be able to testify in support of Ohio House Bill 369, the Ohio Fairness Act. This bill, sponsored by Reps Skindell and Hillyer, this bill's time has come!

When I was a 16-year-old high school student in an all-boys Catholic High School in Cincinnati, I was severely bullied for being "different". My parents had no money to help me pay for college, and I was working part-time at Skyline Chili.

As a teenager, I remember going into Walgreen's and wanting to go down the cosmetics aisle, but being so afraid of my friends seeing me; so afraid of being "caught" and their judgment and ridicule. So I'd go down the aisle, look at the makeup or nail polish, but was too ashamed to spend enough time there to learn, just grab something quick and put it on back at home. At night in secret, a secret I knew I had to keep.

Back then, I saw the military as a way of both paying for college, and an attempt to "man up" – to once and for all put away all of these thoughts and feelings that I was really a girl, not the man that everyone thought I was. I served as an Armor Crewman and Cavalry Scout in the Ohio Army National Guard way back in 1987 – 1995.

I'd even gone through Conversion Therapy in my 20s, after the military, to try and be cured through prayer, fasting, and rubber bands on my wrist to "snap" if I had any "feminine" thoughts. Of course, conversion therapy doesn't work, and drove me deeper into self-hatred and suicidal ideation.

In 2011, I moved to Columbus to finish a Masters in Social Work at The Ohio State University. I ended up working on a group project with the title, "Why is Columbus So Gay?" and as a result, I began to get involved in the LGBT Community. At first I was just an Ally, but over time I began to realize that I identify with most of the letters in LGBTQIA.

I officially came out as transgender to myself in 2013, then to friends, family, coworkers, and more openly to my wife at the time. Through my transition, my life was turned upside down. Most of my family reacted negatively, my marriage ended, and I was worried about losing access to my daughter, Lily. The church rejected me. I had to move several times, and I experienced housing discrimination for the first time in my life.

I faced discrimination from the majority of places at which I attempted to rent an apartment for identifying myself as transgender. Some people said that they'd probably be okay with having me in the building, but would worry about other tenants in the building being afraid of me. Some people would just ask me weird questions about how I pee. Some said that one of their existing tenants might see me as a threat and hurt me.

It took months to find a place to live – a place where I could sleep and my young daughter could come visit me, and maybe even spend nights and weekends for parental visitation.

Since I was a white male prior to my transition, I had never really experienced this kind of discrimination before. I really didn't understand how much privilege I had, and that I was now vulnerable to the transphobic and discriminatory behaviors of others.

More recently, I've been fortunate to work in a place where the nondiscrimination policy includes gender identity and expression, and as a result, I have felt safe to come out as transgender, and have generally been accepted. But most LGBTQIA people working in this state aren't so lucky.

I remember the first time I ever shopped as a woman for a wedding dress. It was December of 2016, here in Columbus. I will never forget the looks I received and the rejection I felt at David's Bridal from some of the staff. After some hesitation and discussion with a manager, they were able to find one person, one younger person at the store, who was willing to fit me. The staff made me feel like a reject, which didn't help change the attitude of customers who openly sneered.

I tell you all of this because people like me need your support. We are vulnerable to discrimination in employment, housing, and public accommodations, and we need laws like the Ohio Fairness Act to help us participate fully in society.

Please vote for this bipartisan bill in the House, and urge your friends in the Senate to approve it as well.

This issue is very important, and it's the right thing to do.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

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