

Chair Hambley, Vice Chair Patton, Ranking Minority Member Brown, and the members of the House Civil Justice Committee:

My name is Lena Tenney and my pronouns are they/them/theirs. I am non-binary or genderqueer—either of those words reflect my truth that I live outside of the man/woman gender binary. If you're not familiar with the idea of sharing your pronouns along with your name, I do so in order to proactively give people the opportunity to know how to most respectfully refer to me. So when referring to me, rather than using "he" or "she," it is most accurate and respectful to use "they." Non-binary and genderqueer identities are not necessarily familiar to many people, which is part of why I am dedicated to living so openly as my true self while educating those around me about what my identity and lived experience mean.

I am a proud transgender Ohioan, currently living in Columbus. As a child of a 22-year Air Force veteran, I was raised living all over the country. This is my third "tour" of Ohio, as I have also lived in Oakwood, OH (during middle school) and St. Mary's, OH (during the end of high school). After graduating high school, I moved from Ohio to Oklahoma in order to attend college. I matriculated to the University of Oklahoma because of the scholarship that I was offered, which was the only way a higher education was financially possible for me. I lived in Oklahoma for seven years—the longest I've ever lived in one place—while completing my bachelors degree and two master's degrees.

I came into my authentic self while living in Oklahoma. Although it was perhaps the most challenging and emotionally difficult thing I've ever done, in that time I found my truth as someone who is queer and does not conform to gender norms. Oklahoma meant so much to me that when I graduated, I was torn as to whether to stay and continue making change as an LGBTQ advocate in a state that had become my adopted home, or move somewhere that might be more progressive and substantively supportive of my identities.

Most of my immediate family members lived in Ohio, so when I saw an intriguing job posting for a racial justice education facilitator at The Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity at The Ohio State University, I realized that my dream job could even bring me closer to the people who mean the most to me and back to a place I had already called home twice! But I had some serious concerns. I knew that Ohio did not have state-wide protections for LGBTQ people in employment, housing, or public accommodations—something that I had fought so hard for in the city in Oklahoma where I lived. It was vitally important to me that wherever I moved to start my career and life, that place needed to have legal protections that ensured that if I encountered the injustice of discrimination because of who I am, I would have recourse. I needed the guarantee of legal equality, even as we continue to create a society that truly values and affirms people not in spite of but because of who they are. I needed that assurance. Ohio did not provide it.

Thankfully, the City of Columbus and The Ohio State University do have such policies protecting LGBTQ people like me. After a lot of thought, I decided to apply for that dream job with the knowledge that I would at least be legally equal in my municipality and my place of employment, even if not necessarily elsewhere in the state.

I knew I would need to rent within the city limits of Columbus so that I would be protected from the very real possibility of housing discrimination. I didn't want to risk getting turned away from renting or evicted if a landlord did not like that I'm queer and transgender. I knew that I would need to stay employed in an institution and city with these policies so that I would be protected from the very real possibility of employment discrimination. I didn't want to risk getting fired if an employer did not like that I'm queer and transgender. I knew applying for this job at OSU and moving across the country to come back to Ohio if hired was risky, but with city and institution protections I decided it was possible.

That was three years ago and moving to Columbus has been one of the best life decisions I have made! I was hired at the OSU Kirwan Institute and have since facilitated more than 180 trainings on implicit bias and how to speak out against racism to more than 13,000 participants in 16 states—most of those participants right here in our home state of Ohio. I helped create the nation's first free, publicly available online trainings on implicit bias in K-12 education and in child welfare. I was honored to serve on OSU's first LGBTQ Student Success Taskforce. I also joined the Board of Directors of TransOhio, which provided a way to directly serve transgender Ohioans all around the state through education, advocacy, and community support. That has included working in the TransOhio and Equitas Health legal clinics, where transgender folks can get free legal assistance to change their legal documents to reflect their true name and gender.

Not all of my experiences here have been positive: I have encountered both blatant and covert homophobia and transphobia while working and in public. Many of those encounters include people questioning which bathroom I should be using when all I want is to be able to use the facilities. Others include people walking out of trainings because I have mentioned my identity as a transgender person. But in spite of those all too frequent experiences, I know that I have worked alongside so many incredible advocates at OSU, in Columbus, and around the state in order to make a difference for everyday Ohioans. I truly treasure those experiences. All of these opportunities to make transformative change in our society—to reach for the ideals of justice and equity—were only possible because I took a chance on leaving my adopted state to return to my home state. And Ohio not having comprehensive human rights laws almost prevented me from doing so.

We must make Ohio an equal opportunity state so that ALL current and future Ohioans can thrive in our state—including LGBTQ Ohioans. We are a part of the fabric of this state. We deserve to be able to live, work, and thrive in this state without fear of legalized discrimination. House Bill 369, The Ohio Fairness Act, will go a long way in ensuring that LGBTQ Ohioans can live with less fear of unjust discrimination and more joy in authenticity. Please support this vital piece of legislation, which will be world changing for so many current and future Ohioans—including showing the whole country that Ohio is a place where you can bring your dreams, aspirations, and full self.