

My family's story is not unlike any other family's story, it is complicated, with many details and experiences. To begin our story, I grew up in Northwest Ohio, and left home at 18 when I joined the military. I met an amazing man while on active duty who was from New York City. As we started our family I separated from the service and he stayed in. We have five children together, four boys and one girl, who were born in different locations around the world. My first two were born in Florida, then a move to Germany, two more were born. Lastly my fifth was born at our next assignment in New Jersey. In that nine years span my husband would deploy and have to leave for months, weeks and even a year at a time. They speak about resiliency as a military family when we have to endure the consistent inconsistency. As a child growing up in such an environment, I believe my daughter was made vulnerable. Looking back, searching for clues I can see them now. Her quiet, shy demeanor; her natural ability in academics, and her people-pleasing tendencies all added up to a need that was filled by something unkind and unhealthy. Leaving New Jersey, after a year without dad took us to Delaware. Entering the fourth grade my daughter began to make friends and get involved in activities. The second year brought a new friend that moved in across the street. A great girl who had similar likes and interests. The two became fast friends. When the inevitable news of another move came, it came as bad news for my daughter, even though the next assignment was to Hawaii. It meant leaving her great group of friends. When the next school year started the class was small with some girls who had been together for a few years already. The not uncommon girl drama began and my daughter was caught in the middle. Then the change in attitude and behavior started. At 12 years old my daughter received a laptop computer as a birthday gift. The rule of the house was that all electronics would go to mom and dad's bedroom at night. This became a nightly fight. Even to the point where she would run out of the house and be gone for a time. Not knowing what was happening to our happy girl, my husband and I were at a loss. I believe that what started as a way to chat with friends from school led to falling down into a dark hole on the internet. Looking for answers and affirmations from people she should have never met. As our time in Hawaii was coming to an end, we became increasingly concerned with the behaviors of our daughter. A late night trip to the ER in an ambulance when she pulled a kitchen knife and held it to her neck happened just weeks before we were to move. Not having time to begin seeing a mental health provider, we continued our journey to the next assignment in Northern Virginia. It was summer, and just before the next school year, I took my daughter to the mall for clothes shopping. It was there in a mall Target that my daughter said to me "I don't like being a girl." Unknowing what to say at the moment, I agreed to let her find clothes in the men's section.

It wasn't long after that I made an appointment with a therapist in hopes of getting to the bottom of the defiant behavior and the feeling of not wanting to be a girl. It took some time because my child is so shy and guarded that she wouldn't allow the words to come out, she had to write out on paper her answers to the therapist's questions. However, it was found out that there were suicidal ideations and even a plan. It was then that we looked into getting her to a psychiatrist. This required a visit with the primary care manager to write a referral. At this appointment, it was not discussed at length, but by the appearance of my daughter in oversized mens clothes the doctor also wrote a referral to a gender specialist at another military base in the area. At the time I was overwhelmed with appointments and never called the specialist. A few weeks later I got a call from this doctor asking why I hadn't made an appointment. I simply told him I didn't think it was necessary to add a third doctor's appointment since my daughter

was already seeing a therapist and now a psychiatrist. He understood but also, over the phone mentioned to me that puberty blockers could act as a pause button and were fully reversible. After that I knew there was no way I would be taking my daughter to that clinic. Not long after, by the recommendation of the therapist, we sought further care in an Intensive Outpatient Program. That lasted for six weeks till an acute hospitalization was called for. Not seeing any improvement in the relationship between parents and the child, the next recommendation was a short-term residential facility. That lasted two months and when our insurance would not approve any longer, we brought our daughter home and got her into a Partial Hospitalization Program. Same story, a few weeks in, still no improvement and another admittance to a psychiatric hospital. Then came a longer residential stay. All these changes in setting and providers and still the issue hasn't been resolved. The professionals are unable to ask the questions to find the root of the distress. It was during this time of one level of care after the other, the therapists and counselors would suggest to my husband and I things like "Would you rather have a live son or a dead daughter?", "You may want to think about seeing someone for yourself to help you." All the while the wedge that had come between child and parent was driven deeper in with the help from the people who we looked to for help.

And now we are here after another move, this time a permanent location as my husband is now retired. We chose to move back to Ohio for the small, rural setting in hopes that it will provide our family with a stable community to set down roots. Again, a therapist was found, but again she is unable to ask the questions that will get to the wound that my daughter is burying. My hope is that because this bill HB454 is being proposed and more and more people who have been hurt by this ideology begin to speak out, there is a chance for my daughter who is still a minor to have the space to heal.

At the time of my fifth child, and fourth boy's birth, I was relieved to have had only one girl. I was never much of a stereotypical girl myself. I played sports, joined the military as a firefighter, and I prefer working outside with my hands over interior decorating, fashion and makeup. I was nervous that I would not be a good role model of femininity for my girl. I now know better because it is not in our interests and preferences that make up feminine or masculine and there are many ways to be a girl.