

“Arriving, Finally, as My Chosen Name”

By Spencer Katz

I had recently cut my hair short for the first time. At school, a male friend saw me and said, “You look like a boy,” and it felt validating, especially coming from a boy. Then, it started to click that maybe I wasn’t the girl I thought I was.

A few nights later, I sat cross-legged on the bed in my dark room, illuminated by the screen of my laptop. A quick Google search had provided the further validation I was seeking: “*Why do I feel like a boy if I’m a girl?*”

I’m transgender. That’s what the word glowing on my laptop told me.

Transgender, “[denoting or relating to a person whose gender identity does not correspond with the sex registered for them at birth](#),” described why I felt so out-of-place in my own body. Deep down, I’ve always felt this way: a slight feeling of unease that escalated to full-fledged dread as I went through puberty and entered middle school, trying to figure out why I felt the way I did.

I was a twelve-year old who’d built my entire personality on what was expected of the girl I wasn’t—dresses, makeup, and boys—when I had no idea who I was.

Identifying with the word “transgender” helped me recognize that conforming to what other people wanted and expected meant suppressing the real me. For the first time I asked myself, “What do I want?” and, after struggling with my sexuality and gender identities for as long as I could remember, they fell into place with ease. Wearing boy’s clothing and my new, short haircut felt as second nature as breathing. When I looked in the mirror, I saw myself for the first time as the person I’d always been inside.

[How did finding language to describe his feelings impact Spencer? Why is it important for educators to be equipped and ready to use inclusive language?]

Unfortunately, as I began researching what it means to be trans, I came across hateful and ugly messages online, which made me afraid that I would be bullied or harassed at school if people found out. I didn’t have support or guidance at home, either. My deeply conservative parents refuse to accept that I’m trans. As painful as their denial is, it doesn’t change who I am.

It does mean, though, that I have to make my own path.

I came out to my friends, and asked them to call me a more masculine version of my [deadname](#), thinking it would make the transition easier for them. But this new name didn’t feel right—it didn’t feel like me.

On top of that, it didn’t make my transition easier for my friends. After my name change they rejected

me outright, saying, in their eyes I'd "always be a girl."

During this time, I started working on a novel and named the main character "Spencer." At first, he was everything I thought I could never be: tall, strong, masculine, and confident. But I realized that nothing was stopping me from being like him. Even if I wasn't the tallest or the most masculine guy in the world, I could still go by Spencer, because it made me happy.

My new name helped me gather the courage to start socially presenting as a boy. While I didn't say it aloud to anyone yet, I changed my name on Discord and my social media profiles, and started dressing for the joy of feeling like myself, rather than to meet the expectations of others.

Almost two years later, I arrived at my first day of high school. Coming from a small middle school where everyone knew me as someone I wasn't, I was eager for this fresh start in a new school with about 4,000 students. I was ready to let people see me for the first time, but I was also terrified of what they would think or say.

Getting ready to leave my house, I spent nearly an hour fussing in the mirror, stressing the question, *do I pass as a boy?* Wearing my tightest sports bras underneath the most masculine clothing I owned, I started the 30-minute walk to school. I'd done everything I could to feel like Spencer and to cue people to read me as him. The only thing left to do was hope that I'd be accepted.

As I took my first steps into the building, the question, *do I pass as a boy?* echoed in my head. It was all I could think about. Then I got lost, missed my first class, and broke down crying in the stairwell: the authentic first-day-of-high-school experience.

[Some trans students may have the same feelings as Spencer when walking into our schools. Knowing this, what can we as educators do to create a sense of belonging the minute they step through our doors?]

My next class was Global History with Mr. Monte. I sat in the back, as far away from the teacher as possible. What-ifs swarmed in my head. What if he doesn't call me 'he'? Or won't call me Spencer? What if someone makes fun of me? What if I get bullied?

Mr. Monte took attendance, and I winced when he called out the name I was assigned at birth, but I couldn't find the courage to tell him my real name just yet. It wasn't until later in the class that I shakily raised my hand.

He walked over to me with a warm, reassuring smile. "Is it OK if I have a nickname?" I asked.

And he responded, "What's your nickname?"

"Spencer," I said, and it felt real. For the first time, I was Spencer. I'd said it out loud, and I knew,



finally, it was me. I was transgender and in high school. I couldn't hide anymore.

Then he asked, "What are your pronouns?" and I relaxed a little.

"He and him."

He nodded, wrote it down, and then said, "I understand." I suddenly felt less alone—there was someone who knew and accepted me.

It was an act of kindness that changed the trajectory of my high school life. Had he not offered me his understanding and respect, I probably wouldn't have had the courage to share my name with my other teachers, and I'd have been stuck living and presenting as someone I never was.

Why does a seemingly brief interaction with Mr. Monte mean so much to Spencer?

Not all of my teachers were as understanding as Mr. Monte. No matter how many times I told some of them my pronouns, it felt to me like they just *wouldn't listen*. They'd call me Spencer, but still she. My pronouns are an extension of my name, the happy and confident version of me, so when teachers didn't use them it created a conflict in my identity where I didn't feel entirely "out" and seen.

Research shows that I'm not alone. According to a 2021 [article](#), "Misgendering: What it is and why it matters," published in *Harvard Health Publishing*, "When people are misgendered, they feel invalidated and unseen. When this happens daily, it becomes a burden that can negatively impact their mental health and their ability to function in the world."

In middle school I had participated actively in class, but worrying that I'd be misgendered by my teachers made it hard for me to want to raise my hand.

The hardest part was not knowing whether they were even trying, whether they were making genuine mistakes or were deliberately dismissing me.

I knew being a trans student in one of the biggest public high schools in New York City wouldn't be easy. But I hadn't realized how much other people could impact my sense of self, thrusting me back to feeling like a stranger in my body. Because being misgendered impacts more than my gender identity. It makes me feel like people only see my former self when they look at me. It feels like someone telling me I'm still that person. I feel trapped in the expectations of others.

A 2014 [study](#) in the journal *Self and Identity* showed that participants expressed feelings of low self-esteem surrounding their appearance and identity when they were frequently misgendered. Similarly, being misgendered made it harder for me to look in the mirror and see Spencer, and to be sure of myself. I wondered, *What's the point of being out of the closet if most people don't see me as him?*

I'm short, my hips are wide, my voice can be soft and feminine, and, well, you can imagine what else.





But because I'm a minor and don't have my parents' support, I'm unable to be diagnosed with [gender dysphoria](#), which also means that I haven't been able to start [medically transitioning](#), or even use [puberty blockers](#).

The school doesn't have a clear policy for someone like me when it comes to bathrooms, locker rooms, sports teams, etc. I live in a gray area, among other trans people who aren't able to transition yet, and to put it bluntly, it sucks.

What about the school's policies and climate is preventing Spencer from feeling a sense of belonging at his school?

During one of my uglier experiences at school, a student in my gym class called me a homophobic slur. It made me feel powerless and weak, and I hated it. It filled me with rage, too. *It's not fair*, I thought, *he gets to go home and live his life while I try to figure out which bathroom I'm supposed to use.* Another time, after sharing my pronouns, a sophomore boy snidely asked about my genitalia. Harassment like this has become a common part of my high school experience.

Every morning, I wake up in a body that feels foreign to me, and being constantly misgendered and harassed painfully reminds me of this.

I don't know how I would have dealt with these negative emotions and the bitterness they created in me without the support system that I started building at school.

I formed a group of friends who call me "he" without issue. We all got to know each other through Drama Club, which seemed to attract a lot of other LGBTQ students. When we're together, I don't have to hold my breath whenever they're about to refer to me in the third person.

My Drama Club advisor and algebra teacher, Mr. Lasher, struggled with my pronouns sometimes, which stung and made me wonder, *Am I doing something wrong? Is it because I'm not passing? Should I not talk because my voice is an octave higher than it should be?* But I knew he didn't mean it. What was most important to me was that he tried.

"I get it," I told him one day, "It takes time. Even *I* misgender myself sometimes."

"I know," he said, "And I know it hurts you more, but it hurts *me* too. To be messing up this much." I almost cried as the father-like compassion of his words struck me. It was the first time since coming out that I felt something like parental support.

When I shared with him that, "everyone is still calling me she," referring to my other teachers, Mr. Lasher reached out to my guidance counselor, and she sent a gentle email to all of my teachers reminding them that my pronouns are he, him, and his. From then on, he became the trusted adult in my life.





What is Spencer learning about advocacy and allyship from his Drama Club peers and Mr. Lasher?

If my guidance counselor's actions were a schoolwide policy, it would benefit all trans students, including my friends at school whose guidance counselors don't advocate for them in this way. Eventually, I want to be a teacher, too, so that I can push for these kinds of policy changes and give other kids the support that Mr. Lasher and my counselor have given me.

Now, as a sophomore, I've learned to take a deep breath when I'm misgendered, to count to 10 and remind myself that I'm still Spencer. I'm proud of how far I've come.

My friends elected me president of The Drama Club, and I do my best to maintain it as a safe space for them, just as they made it a safe space for me where I can be myself, I can breathe. When I'm surrounded by their smiling faces and laughter, I know who I really am. I'm Spencer, defined by my personality and actions.

I used to be scared of being myself. I wouldn't even use my chosen name for something silly like my Starbucks order. But now, no matter who it is, I always introduce myself as Spencer because my name is something I'm no longer willing to sacrifice.

Spencer originally represented a version of me that I thought could only exist in fiction, and now it's a symbol for choosing myself in real life. Telling people my name reminds me that I'm writing my own story. After everything I've been through, I'm still me, and I'm going to be myself, no matter what.

What does Spencer's story tell us about supporting transgender and non-binary youth?



How to Support Trans and Gender-Diverse Students By Anonymous

Some families, like mine, are unaccepting of trans and non-binary people. This can cause great conflict and stress at home. But teachers can do a lot to create a supportive environment at school. Here are some things my own teachers did that helped me, and other steps I wish they had taken:

- In New York State, schools must permit students to use the bathrooms and locker rooms that correspond to their gender identity, as opposed to the sex they were assigned at birth. Teachers: Speak up if these policies are not being followed in your school.
- At the beginning of each semester, ask students to let you know if they use a name other than their legal one and have preferred pronouns before taking attendance. You can pass around a sheet of paper where students can write their preferred name and pronouns or invite students to meet with you after class.
- Avoid making assumptions about a student's gender identity based on how they look or talk. A student may not fit your idea of what a "boy" or a "girl" looks like. It's better to refer to them by name or simply "they" if you're unsure about their pronouns.
- Some trans kids, like me, are out at school but not at home. If a student has told you they are trans, ask what name and pronouns they'd like you to use in front of their family.
- If you accidentally call the student by the wrong gender or pronouns, just correct yourself and move on.
- Don't tell anyone that the student is transgender without their permission. This can be humiliating and can even lead to physical or verbal abuse. If a student has confided in you, they trust you to keep this information private. Ask the student who else knows and how you can keep them safe.
- Don't tell the student they're "wrong" about their gender. They know themselves and their experiences better than anyone else.
- Avoid phrases like "when you were [birth name]" or "before you were transgender." In my experience, comments like these are hurtful to hear because I have always been trans; I just hadn't come out yet.
- If you learn that a parent is reacting badly to a student's gender identity or expression, treat the situation with the same sensitivity you would any other family issue. Expressing sympathy and listening to a student can go a long way. Follow established reporting procedures if you think abuse may be occurring at home.
- It may seem challenging to keep abreast of changing terminology and concepts of gender identity. But by doing so, an educator can help create a safe learning environment for trans, non-binary, and gender non-conforming students.

Which of these suggestions can you begin to apply in your classroom/school?



Resources for Trans Teens

Being a trans teen can be scary and isolating, but it doesn't have to be. Here are some resources that might help you—whether you're looking for help managing dysphoria, legal support, or just want to chat with someone who recognizes the validity of your identity!

The Trevor Project

Features a 24/7, year-round [online chat](#) for LGBTQ youth who need immediate help or support to connect with a trained counselor, a [guide to understanding gender identities](#), and a [handbook for coming out](#). I learned about them from my school's counselor.

Trans Youth Equality Foundation

A [resource guide made by trans youth, for trans youth](#), featuring coming out stories, tips for managing dysphoria, legal resources, and more.

Queer Youth Assemble

A nationwide collective of queer youth 25-and-under who organize community [events](#) and [protests](#), create [zines](#), offer [free online resources](#), and are seeking applications from fellow [queer youth seeking to volunteer](#).

The New York Public Library

A collection of resources for trans youth in New York City and New York State for finding community, legal help, self-defense and wellness classes, and resources to share with your parents, friends, and allies.

Resources for Educators, Parents, and Other Potential Allies

Are you a friend of a trans person? A parent? An ally who wants to know more? Check out the resources below. Education is the first step in creating a safer environment for trans youth.

Pronouns.org

A practical, accessible resource featuring a [guide to personal pronouns and why they matter](#), and another on [what to do if someone makes a mistake and mispronouns someone else](#), along with other useful how-to's

The Trevor Project

Offers an [online guide to being an ally](#) to Transgender and Nonbinary Youth

Trans Youth Equality Foundation

A [guide for educators](#) seeking to create a safer school environment for trans youth, including trainings, workshops, legal resources, and a breakdown of the current (federal) legal protections for trans students

Queer Youth Assemble

Featuring guides to supporting queer youth [for parents](#) and [for educators](#).

