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*This is how I feel*

## Growing up transgender: North Jersey kids tell of unease, bullying, acceptance

*The Record interviewed a young adult and, with the permission and participation of their parents, five young people who are either transgender or questioning their true gender identity.*

**ABBOTT KOLOFF** , **ANDREW WYRICH** , **MONSY ALVARADO** | North Jersey Record

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Other North Jersey teenagers said they wondered whether they were alone before they researched what it means to be transgender. A 7-year-old girl expressed questions about her gender identity, and her parents are helping her find out whether she is a boy or a girl. And an 11-year-old boy who has been bullied drew a self-portrait as half boy and half girl.

“This is how I feel,” he wrote on the picture.

They are at the heart of the debate that’s raging nationally and locally over laws and educational policies related to transgender people. Last week, the Pascack Valley Regional High School District joined at least a dozen other North Jersey districts by adopting a policy allowing students to use restrooms based on gender identity. North Carolina recently enacted a law that does just the opposite, requiring people to use bathrooms based on the gender on their birth certificate.

The debate over these policies and laws has been emotional. Some people opposed to Pascack Valley’s policy expressed concerns about privacy rights for students who were not transgender.

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To help put a face on the people most affected by the debate, The Record interviewed a young adult and, with the permission and participation of their parents, five young people who are either transgender or questioning their true gender identity.

Their stories are not all the same, although there are similarities, and they reflect a wide range of young people at different stages of life, from 7 years old to 20 years old. Two very young children are still figuring out their gender identity. Older children interviewed were past questioning, and have come to express a gender identity that differs from the one corresponding to their biological sex at birth.

A 15-year-old transgender boy from Glen Rock said he began researching the subject two years ago and felt both relief and a profound affirmation when he read about experiences that mirrored his own.

“Yes!” he said. “That’s me!”

Here are their stories.

## **Beck K. tells his story**

**'I want to be on the boys' team as a boy'**



Alex gives Beck, 13 a hug while his sister, Lizzie, 9 prepares snacks.

AMY NEWMAN/NORTHJERSEY.COM

Beck K., 13, is an avid soccer player and has been honing his skills for the past five years. His passion for blocking shots as a goalie is rivaled only by his passion for the newest viral Internet memes or the latest book he's reading.

But Beck, a Woodcliff Lake resident, hasn't been on the field for his club team this spring season — because if he wanted to, he would be forced to play as a girl, and that, he said, isn't who he is.

Beck, who was born female, dresses like a boy, acts like a boy and, most important, identifies as a boy. His birth certificate has been updated to show his new, preferred name, and the listed gender on it is in the process of being changed, said his parents, who asked that their last name be withheld out of concerns about discrimination. But his inability to play on the boys team reminds him that he is treated separately and that he doesn't have a choice.

"I still want to play, I just don't want to play on this girls team," he said last week. "Right now I could technically be classified as a girl and play on the boys team, but that's not how I'd like to be identified. I want to be on the boys team as a boy."

His absence from the soccer field will likely be temporary, because Beck will be a freshman at Pascack Hills High School in September. The district recently adopted a policy that would allow him to join sports teams that correspond to his gender identity, among other provisions — something he said he intended to take advantage of.

Two weeks ago, before Beck and his classmates were to begin taking a standardized test, they were told to use the restroom. As he watched his friends and classmates shuffle into the bathrooms that corresponded with the gender they were assigned at birth, all-too-familiar emotions surfaced: frustration, confusion, sadness.

Using the restroom seemed so easy for his classmates, but Beck had to walk down a long hallway to the nurse's office, and use a single-stall bathroom as part of a special accommodation.

"They're all filing in, and I'm over there," he said as his parents sat next to him in their living room. "To anyone else it wouldn't have been a big deal at all. It was a sad, kind of lonely feeling."

While Beck said he appreciated the provisions made for him, the bathrooms are only a small part of a larger issue: He wants to be treated the same way as everyone else.

Even the simple act of a substitute teacher reading a class roster became something to dread. While his regular teachers know his preferred names and pronouns, the roster used to have his old name — and just hearing a substitute teacher read it aloud reminded him of the uncomfortable feelings that had gripped him for so long.

Beck said he had felt a "general feeling of discomfort" as a girl, but slowly discovered that he wasn't alone by scrolling through Instagram and other social media. When he saw that other people felt the way he did, he began to understand.

"The problem was when I wasn't out, there was a lot of frustration," he said. "When I first realized, there definitely was a sense of relief, because I knew why I was feeling what I was feeling. It was comforting being able to place it."

Beck told his parents, Alex and Alina, last summer that he identified as male and was met with no resistance, he said — something he considers "very lucky."

Both Beck and his father spoke before the Pascack Valley Board of Education when the transgender policy was discussed. Beck said it was important to show opponents that he was one of the people the policy would affect.

Alex said he was angered that the debate had centered on bathrooms and locker rooms, because he viewed it as a civil rights issue and an anti-discriminatory policy.

"It is a policy that is fundamentally accepting our children for who they are and who they say they are — which are the same thing," Alex said.

## **Edison Donovan tells his story**

### **'Transgender musician becomes a new role model'**

Edison Donovan, 15, pictured with his mother, Irene Donovan.

Edison Donovan, 15, pictured with his mother, Irene Donovan.

Edison Donovan said he felt more like a boy, and not a girl as his birth certificate said, by the time he was 10 years old. He didn't know anyone else like him or words to describe what he was feeling until two years ago, when he heard the lead singer of his favorite band refer to herself as transgender.

"I thought: 'Wow, there's a name,'" Edison, 15, of Glen Rock said in a recent interview.

He waited a year before telling his parents, he said, because he was still sorting out his feelings. "Is this something that would just go away?" he had wondered. "Am I feeling this at all?"

At first, Edison came out as a lesbian, but as he did research in the local library and read about the experiences of other children, he reached a different conclusion. He watched a YouTube video of Isabella "Bunny" Bennett, the lead singer of Steam Powered Giraffe, chronicling her transition to a woman. He read a book called "Beyond Magenta," containing interviews with transgender and gender-neutral children.

Reading about transgender children and their wide variety of experiences was a relief, Edison said. Some knew at a very young age, in some cases 3 years old, that they were born the wrong gender. Others, like him, came to that conclusion later.

"I never thought there was something wrong with me," said Edison, a sophomore at Glen Rock High School. He added that he felt "better" when he read about experiences that mirrored his own.

"Yes!" he said, when he read such stories. "That's me!"

A year ago, Edison said, he told his friends he was transgender, and they didn't judge him. "They were like, 'Yeah, we figured,'" he said. Then he told his parents almost by accident, saying "I feel like a boy" in a conversation with his father. His parents, he said, also seemed to know.

"I wasn't surprised," said his mother, Irene. "I started to do more research."

By then, Edison was calling himself "Ed" in school, a nickname derived from the initials of his original first name and his last name. He said the name was "plausible" and "something my friends could call me without anyone knowing."

He declined to discuss the name he was given at birth, saying he wanted to "put that name behind me" because it brings back memories of pretending to be something he is not. He stopped wearing dresses years ago and cut his hair short. He asked his parents to take down some photos in which he has long hair.

"It reminded me of when I was really uncomfortable," he said of the photos. "I was trying to be a girl. I don't like being reminded of that."

There were uncomfortable moments over the years. He said it was "awkward" when he stayed in a room with three girls during an eighth-grade field trip, even though they were friends. He used

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This school year, he said, he is allowed to use the boys bathroom and locker room, and he said he was much happier. "I feel more comfortable doing that," he said. "It makes me feel a lot better. My identity is confirmed and taken as valid."

Edison said he was troubled by the law recently enacted in North Carolina and by similar proposals elsewhere. "I get really angry when I hear about bathroom bills," he said. "How bigoted do you have to be to force people to use the wrong bathroom?"

In October, his name was legally changed to Edison Alexander Donovan. The middle name is for his maternal great-grandfather. No one has ever "outright denied my identity" as a boy, he said, although he is used to people asking questions.

"They may have said things behind my back," he said. "I've always known people are bigoted. A lot of people said, 'I don't understand.' There's a difference between being ignorant and bigoted. I've educated my fair share of people."

## **Chris Cioce tells his story**

**'Don't have to understand it, just have to respect it'**



Chris Cioce, 17.

CARMINE GALASSO/NORTHJERSEY.COM

Chris Cioce hated the dresses his mother had him wear for Christmas photos with Santa at the mall, and by the time he got to high school he knew that it was more than a difference in fashion sense — that he was not the daughter his parents believed him to be.

Chris, 17, had suspected that he was really a boy for some time. When he got the lead role in a sixth-grade play, playing Charlie in "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory," cutting his hair for the part and wearing boys clothes, he said it was the first time he felt completely at ease.

At some point in his childhood, he said, he became alarmed by his attraction to girls. When he was in eighth grade, he decided he needed to tell his parents he was a lesbian. He said he was "scared" they would not understand. He told his mother he had some "pretty bad" news, and would send her a text message. She asked whether he was smoking, doing drugs, or pregnant.

"I'm gay," the text message said.

"She said, 'Oh, I thought it was going to be something bad,'" Chris said.

At first, he said, his father blamed himself for taking Chris to a KISS concert and letting him wear leather jackets. Chris said some middle school classmates had bullied him and had called him names after he came out as gay. This was nothing new. He had encountered problems before, he said, when he was one of two girls on a recreation league football team.

"I wasn't out yet, but everyone knew," he said.

Players tackled him after the whistle had blown to end a play, he said, and one boy picked him up by the face mask. "Now we're friends," Chris said. "I'm not one to hold a grudge."

A couple of years later, Chris made another announcement, this time after two years of research on the Internet and reading about people who were transgender. At the time, he said, he didn't know of any students at his school identifying as transgender.

"I thought I was weird," he said. "I thought I was the only one."

Now, he said, he knows other transgender teenagers and is a singer-guitar player in a band with a friend who is transgender.

He was uncomfortable in his body for a long time, he said, but it "took a long time to vocalize." Before his sophomore year, he asked his mother to pick a boy's name for him because he wanted her to have a say, just as she had selected his birth name.

His mother, Cathy Cioce, said that she believed Chris "always knew" he was a boy and that she began reading up on transgender issues after he told her. "I always tell Chris that as long as he's happy and healthy, those are my concerns," she said.

School administrators, Chris said, granted his request to use the boys bathrooms and locker rooms in his sophomore year. He said he got some "weird looks" when he first went into the boys locker room. But for the most part, he said, classmates responded with more maturity and were more accepting than they were in middle school.

Not that there haven't been some difficulties. One co-worker at a camp where he was a counselor, he said, was fired after touching him inappropriately and saying he was "too girly to be a guy."

“You don’t have to understand it,” he said of his gender identity. “You just have to respect it.”

When he first came out as transgender, he said, he tried too hard to fit in as a boy, acting “macho” and tougher than he really was because he thought that’s how boys were supposed to act. But he said he eventually realized that “I can just be me,” and is happier now.

“I used to be uncomfortable,” he said. “But now I’m chill with everything.”

## **Lucas Mihnea tells his story**

### **'Child's simple drawing reveals complex feelings'**

Lucas Mihnea picked up a blue marker and began to draw after describing difficulties he has faced at school for just being himself.

In minutes, the soft-spoken 11-year-old, who was born male, had finished his picture of a person who on one side is male and on the other side female. A squiggly line runs through the middle of the figure while two arms pull it in opposite directions.

“I wish everyone in the world would accept each other for who they are,” Lucas said.

But he has had a hard time at school. A classmate pushed him against a wall in the hallway, then used a slur. A few months ago, a girl punched him in the nose, leaving him in tears.

Since then, Lucas has endured name calling, shoving, and cruel comments from students at his elementary school in Bloomfield, said his mother, Timea Dancs.

“We are a family who accepted how he is and whoever he wants to be,” Dancs said. “And now all these kids are molding his brain when he should just be going there to focus on studies, he shouldn’t be paying attention to this noise, and this noise shouldn’t exist.”

Three or four times a week, Lucas said, a student says something to him that makes him feel sad.

“It just makes me feel, I don’t know, frightened or just unsure of what will happen,” he said.

He wants students at his school to learn more about people like him. “They need to know I’m not the only person in the world who is like this,” he said.

Bloomfield schools were on break last week and officials could not be reached for comment.

Dancs said she and her husband never wanted to classify Lucas. But recently, after he came home crying, she reached out to Garden State Equality, an advocacy and education group for the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community, and the Institute of Personal Growth in Jersey City. There, she said, her son was evaluated and said to be gender non-conforming.

After Lucas was born, Dancs said, she bought gender-neutral toys. When Lucas received cars and trucks as gifts, he was not interested in them. As a toddler, he was drawn to the movie characters of Cinderella and Ariel, the mermaid. He also liked to play dress up, and asked for dolls.

"He liked pink, he liked purple, he liked glitter," she said. "We said maybe it's just a phase ... but it never really happened for us, and I kind of sensed it. ... It was too ingrained in his being."

Dancs said that she had talked to school officials about bringing someone into the school to talk about gender diversity and that they had been receptive.

## **Avner tells her story**

### **"The in-between world' of gender creative'**



Avner, 7, with parents, Mary, left, and Shanie , right.

CARMINE GALASSO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Avner has become more vocal about her likes and dislikes.

The 7-year-old with the contagious smile and cheerful disposition said she's still a girl when she's around most people, but when she is by herself or with only her mothers, Shanie and Mary,

she said she loves getting pedicures and showed off her blue polished toenails.

“I think Avner lives in the in-between world,” Mary said. “She picks and chooses when she wants to be whoever she wants to be, and so far that is working.”

Shanie and Mary, who live in Essex County, describe Avner as “gender creative,” meaning she doesn’t conform to traditional gender roles, and said that she was doing well at the Montclair Kimberley Academy in Montclair, where she is a first-grader. They said teachers, staff and other children were understanding and accommodating. On picture day this year, they said, when the photographer asked the boys to put their hands in their pockets, Avner asked if she could, too. Her classmates supported her request, and the photographer agreed.

For several weeks now, Avner has used the girls bathroom instead of the gender-neutral restroom at school. Avner said that she wanted to use the boys bathroom but that she thought “it will feel weird because no one knows that I want to.” In the girls bathroom, she said, sometimes she’s mistaken for a boy.

“Sometimes I just wash my hands quickly and run,” she said.

Avner added, “It’s a lot of negotiating — the bathroom.”

Children’s birthday parties also bring confusion when girls and boys are split for activities, or when there are gender-specific party favors, her mothers said.

Shanie and Mary said they had focused on building their daughter’s self-confidence by exposing her to books and having conversations with her on gender diversity.

Her mothers said that they didn’t want to label Avner but that “gender creative” felt comfortable.

“Rather than call her a particular label that the outside world can identify ... she is a gender-creative kid,” Mary said, “and that might turn into her being a transgendered person and it also might not. It could also turn into her being a woman who looks like me, right? Or she could also turn into a woman who wears ball gowns.”

The ball gowns elicited immediate disapproval from Avner, who yelled, “No!”

## **Hannah Deckard tells her story 'Finding comfort 'facing my own identity'**



Hannah Deckard, 20

CARMINE GALASSO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

The day before her 18th birthday, as she sat anxiously in a math class waiting for a test, Hannah Deckard had a realization. She wasn’t a boy — she was a girl.

was."

Hannah, now 20, said she began to question her gender identity when she was 11 or 12. She was fascinated with lesbian culture, but felt that she could never be part of that community because of her gender.

So she "catapulted" herself into being more masculine — cut her hair and tried to match the idea of being a man.

A drawing by Lucas Mihnea, 11, showing that he feels divided as a person who is gender non-conforming. "He doesn't belong in a box with boys or girls," said his mother.

But Hannah said she hated faking how she felt and was uncomfortable in her own skin.

"I think in some part I was scared of facing my own identity," said Hannah, a Chatham Township resident.

When she was 17, she began working at Garden State Equality, where she met transgender women, and her feelings about her gender identity began to make sense, she said.

"I saw so many people who were happy with this part of themselves," she said.

What has followed hasn't been easy. She said that her father struggles with accepting her gender identity and that she has always had a "difficult" relationship with her mother.

In high school, Hannah first described herself as gay, and later bisexual, before expressing her internal gender in her senior year.

When she first came out as female, Hannah said, she wore dresses, but over time she has become comfortable in "whatever I feel like wearing."

Hannah said she had become more confident since enrolling at Manhattan Community College and will attend Hampshire College in Massachusetts in the fall, studying writing and filmmaking.

The family of one of her friends has been supportive, Hannah said, and that feeling of validation has been invaluable.

"There is nothing better," she said, "than feeling comfortable with yourself and feeling like you are a capable individual with something to offer to the world."

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**Transgender teens quietly gain rights:** North Jersey schools have put policies in place, but they differ greatly district to district

**8-year-old transgender boy barred from Boy Scouts:** Joe Maldonado looked forward to camping trips and science projects with his Secaucus Cub Scout pack

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