

March 21, 2011

Testimony in support of HB 6599: An Act Concerning Discrimination

Senator Coleman, Representative Fox and members of the Judiciary Committee:

I'm Don Arsenault, my 19 year old transgender daughter and I, live in Stratford with my father. I am here in support of House Bill 6599: An Act Concerning Discrimination and to answer any questions that may promote better understanding.

I am an original member of a rapidly growing support group with 40 parents of transgender children from Connecticut. We exist not because there is anything wrong with our children, but because of challenges society presents them. Children whose goals and potential are no different from any youth. We share stories of challenges as well as success, when schools do provide equality, and protection. My daughter's story may illustrate why legal protections are needed for gender non-conforming youth, and adults.

When my daughter's appearance began to align with her female identity her grades dropped dramatically with the challenge of constant taunts...and tears. The school's first solution was to have her sit class out in the guidance office when the harassment was excessive, removing her from the educational opportunities inherently expected in a classroom. I was told, "well you know how kids are...and your child is just so different."

It was suggested she might prefer getting a GED, attending night school with adults, or entering the Job Corps at an out of state campus. Next was a program for students with behavioral problems, although I was told that she was never a behavioral problem. No one told us a student that had physically assaulted her would be starting there the same day. She tried transferring to a smaller high school but no longer felt safe. She spent her last 2 ½ years on homebound instruction.

When I first asked that the teachers call her Rose and use female pronouns in correspondence, it was suggested I not make a big deal about it. We soon changed her name legally, and within 2 hours of receiving the Probate documents, the school abided by the ruling with no big deal occurring. It seems that legal rulings do make people feel accountable to follow them.

Rose made honors 4 of her last 6 marking periods. Her tutor, a former art teacher, had to cram instruction for 8 courses into 2 hours per day. Despite receiving only 30% of the time with a teacher that other students received my daughter graduated and attends community college.

It's ironic that her rough start kept her from qualifying for 4 year colleges in Connecticut – yet while still on home bound she was called in to help educate students at UCONN, Central CT, Southern CT, 3 community colleges, and a classroom of DCF workers regarding her gender identity journey. She has spoken here at the Capitol, and helped other schools with transgender students.

The message we had received, and that Rose may face in the work place, is that my daughter is less than. The message I learned watching her courageous journey to participate in life, to attend college, and become a reasonably happy, productive member of society ...is that my daughter is enough. She is more than enough, not only for I as a father to love and cherish, but for society and the State of CT to provide her with the basic human rights of dignity, opportunity and yes, equal responsibility. Please pass House Bill 6599, don't let my daughter and others like her down, and I assure you they will not let the State of CT down.

Thank you for this opportunity,
Don Arsenault