

Trans Youth and Their Ability to Thrive vs. Their Environments

When I was seven years old, I was misdiagnosed with an anxiety disorder. Since then, I've learned that the feelings and behaviors that led to that diagnosis were actually a result of gender dysphoria. When I was in high school, I struggled to maintain passing grades and attend classes. Since then, I took the initiative to apply to college and have begun to genuinely enjoy schooling. I am often frustrated trying to articulate the differences in my previous environments with my current environment without having it seem like my experiences are being downplayed. Statements like, "oh yeah, it's just as bad up here," feel like they invalidate my trauma. Centering on the "place" of my college dorm in Shepherdstown, West Virginia — rather than places in West Virginia and Maryland off campus — will allow me to hone in on the relative safety that I feel existing here. Trans people can thrive in new environments.

I spent the first twelve years of my life in Boone, North Carolina, living with my parents and my younger sibling. Other members of my family lived very closeby, so we'd often meet for birthdays and holidays. During this time, I was so close with my external family that two of my cousins felt more like sisters. I enjoyed running, drawing, and messing around with computers. I taught myself how to use a block-coding website when I was in third grade, and later moved on to actual programming languages to make games. When I was about twelve years old, my aunt passed away due to a sudden case of pneumonia at the age of 43. Because of how integral she was to our family structure, everyone began to drift apart. Eventually, my sister-like cousins moved away, and my parents got divorced. I started to travel a lot between my mom in the Atlanta area, my dad in coastal North Carolina, and my grandparents in Clemson, South

Carolina. Traveling between states a lot, I struggled to maintain long-lasting in-person commitments and bonds. There were so few children where my dad lived that the county didn't even have a school. While I slowly drifted apart from my close friends in middle school, I turned to the internet to fuel my hobbies and develop friendships. I continued the pursuit of game development. I made close friends and online cliques via obscure interests. I was the textbook definition of savvy.

I learned (a few months after-the-fact) that the reason my parents got divorced was because my mom was gay, and she hadn't figured out her sexuality until after getting married and having two children — heteronormativity and lesbian stereotypes were much more prevalent when she was growing up in the '80s (Bitterman and Hess). While more accurate information and healthy discussion surrounding gender, sexual, and romantic minorities exists today, heteronormativity still exists, and it's especially loud in the Bible Belt where I grew up. I started seriously questioning my gender when I was nineteen. I only had one (online) trans friend at the time, and I wasn't nearly as involved with the LGBT community as I am today. For the first year after coming out to my family and friends, I regularly avoided presenting as gender non-conforming in public for my own safety. I worked in food service for six months pretending to be a man because no co-worker or customer would respect me otherwise.

Despite all of this, I was still attending public school. My freshman year of high school was the worst year of my life. I was hospitalized for depression and had an absurd number of absences, causing me to borderline-fail all of my classes — except math, of course. I didn't know this yet, but much of my struggle was due to undiscovered gender dysphoria (Bach). It was a

terrible experience, and the start of my sophomore year was beginning to feel like the exact same thing, so I switched to self-directed learning. It's a form of schooling that involves the student deciding on their own curriculum, and it worked for me. I graduated in May, 2020. After graduating from high school, I did not want to go to college. My extremely negative experience with institutional education caused me to outright reject the idea of continuing it. I spent two years pursuing game development with the intention of releasing something and finding financial stability within that field. During this time, I gained a much stronger appreciation for soundtrack composition and production, and started seriously considering focusing on music instead of programming. It was difficult to see myself enjoying a job in computer science; music was something I could see a future in. After a few scrapped projects and setbacks, I almost spontaneously changed my mind about college. I chose Shepherd University in West Virginia because one of my online friends was already attending. It was the perfect storm: a newfound passion to pursue music, an excuse to escape my imprisoning environment, and a chance to finally make long-lasting in-person connections.

I spent nearly a year preparing for college. I got my GED despite already having a valid diploma because it looked better than an empty transcript. I donated roughly 80% of my wardrobe and various other belongings to Goodwill — or my younger sibling, if they wanted anything. I started HRT (hormone replacement therapy) and grew the confidence to experiment with my presentation — despite the gross remarks and catcalls I ended up receiving in suburban South Carolina. I obtained enough of a grasp on my mental health to safely wean off of my Bipolar Disorder medication under the guidance of my parents. I finally found a name for my

circadian rhythm disorder (which had stumped sleep specialists and nutritionists for years), and I used that knowledge to get better about my sleep schedule, diet, and various other habits. I was fortunate enough to have my grandparents' financial support and enough of their time to make things happen. Despite the spider webs, trash, and loose clothing from the previous tenants, stepping onto my dorm room's unvacuumed carpet for the first time felt like washing away everything from my past to make room for everything ahead of me.

My roommate's name is Julius. We met online a few years ago, which is still surreal to me, and now we're attending college together. Last semester, he lived on-campus without a roommate because most of his close friends were commuters, and he (like me) did not feel comfortable with a random roommate. We decided to room together because we were already comfortable in each other's vicinity, and it was cheaper than living alone. This decision has been vital to me, because having a closeby trans friend is something I've never had before, and it offers me a uniquely valuable support system. Because of my experiences, I was extremely interested in Julius' collegial experience and whether he agreed that the Shepherd University environment felt more safe and opportune than other places we'd lived in our lives. I took the opportunity to interview him (Gamber), and when asking questions, I wanted to make a distinction between "institutional oppression" and "individual oppression" — or — whether problems arose because of systematic things in society (laws & rules, standard procedures, etc.) or because of individual people (strangers, authority figures, etc.). During our conversation, we focused heavily on Shepherd University itself and how it as an institution handled inclusivity, as well as our positive and negative experiences both here and in our pasts. I was shocked to learn

that it wasn't until very recently that the school replaced Sakai with Brightspace, allowing students to have preferred names in a virtual classroom. It was also frustrating to hear stories about professors who still work at the school causing problems for trans students. Despite these issues, we agreed that Shepherd University — while imperfect — is more comfortable and facilitating than the high schools we've attended and the homes we've lived in. This is especially prevalent in our dorm. Julius mentioned, "I do a lot better school-wise when I'm at my dorm than when I'm at my home," and that struck a chord with me because it felt like it described my entire relationship with education. I want to learn here; I did not want to learn there.

Julius and I aren't just two people with similar experiences. The things that we've shared are common and nothing new. A trans student of Emma Copley Eisenberg, the author of *The Third Rainbow Girl*, flocked to Shepherd University to improve his situation before I even considered attending (Eisenberg 296). Mainstream media tends to focus on the negative, mentioning suicide rates and correlations with depression. While these stats are grim, it's important to recognize that these situations are the result of a lack of familial or medical support, more often than not. Trans youth show success in all areas when supported by their families, friends, and educators (Bach). The fact that trans people can succeed and find happiness is reassuring, I'd like to think. Hopefully, more people will come to realize this, because not everyone is able to free themselves from their environment. States like Florida are beginning to pass laws that have devastating effects on transgender youth and their families (Human Rights Campaign). The scare happening in Florida right now has happened at various levels of severity countless times in just this past year. If more people recognized the frequency and impact of

institutional oppression and individual oppression everywhere, more trans kids could have the experience that I had when I stepped into my college dorm for the first time.

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