

## Rainbows: A Transgender Prisoner's Emergence

- Geri Q

My chosen name is Geri, I am a 48 year old, Queer and transgender persyn\*. I was out, and comfortable in my identity, but in 1994, a 25-to-life prison sentence changed the rules, and my life. Handcuffed, chained and shackled -I was shipped, like cattle, to the upstate New York gulag, and tossed into the deep end of the prison pool -maximum security.

I was young, bright and bold, but in evaluating this oppressive environment -intelligence and self-safety won over boldness. I backed my cute butt into the closet, and quietly closed the door. Thus began the chronic stress, anxiety and self-monitoring of a sheep hiding among the wolves. A masquerade and madness, for as time passed, the weight of my fraud grew. I came to feel, that if exposed, my deception would be judged, and punished, more harshly even, than my 'sin' of Queerness.

I am female in essence, spirit and soul -all packaged in a male appearing body. It was the small things which would betray the secret of my true nature and identity: A little extra hipsway, subtle body movements and mannerisms, the way I sit, voice tone, etc. Those things which feel natural, but 'girly' to me -all forbidden.

I became my own constant supervisor, replete with a wicked stepmother voice in my head. one which scolded me for each, and every lapse in my behavior. Even when alone and unobserved in my cell, the voice would not allow me to relax and be myself. My feminine habits had to be broken, lest they slip out in view of the transphobic and hostile prisoner population.

The risks run high for transgender and Queer prisoners. We are routinely harassed, abused, beaten, stabbed, raped, and sometimes murdered. With these threats in mind, and scores of violent incidents indelible in my memory -I perfected and maintained my cover, as a heterosexual male, for the first twenty years of my incarceration.

Change is often dependent on a catalyst, and in human affairs -the will to act. In my case, this required a transfer to a more Queer tolerant facility, one with a few more LGBTQI peers in sight, and more so -I had reached a critical mass of personal frustration. Upon arrival at my new housing block, I greeted an openly Gay prisoner, and in a loud, clear voice said: "I'm under the same rainbow." Yeah, kind of lame... But this, declared amidst a group of mainstream prisoners and staff, was a declaration of independence for me. Never again, would I sacrifice liberation for security.

The prison, of course, continued to operate as it had the moment before -now, with just another Queer on the count. A brief hug from the Gay guy, and a few words from bystanders, and I had stepped back into the visible LGBTQI world. What I hadn't expected, was that I'd have to actually work at establishing myself in my Queer identity.

At the infamous Attica c.f. -where NYSDOCCS held me hostage for 13 straight years, I was well known, and news that I had 'turned' Queer, would have flashed across the facility like a breaking news alert on CNN. But there at Auburn c.f. -the first prison built in our contemporary penal Empire, I was virtually unknown, and as such, nobody really noticed.

Realizing that this would take some planning, and effort -I consulted a hetero prisoner friend, who's also an ally to the Queer community, and a pro marketing guy. This was a rebranding campaign. The old 'Garry' would become the new and trans/Queer: 'Geri' to all and sundry.

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- Previous work, permission on file.

Geri Q



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- Geri Q (2)

I've seen some of my Queer peers just roll out of their cells one morning, suddenly, full-tilt 'Queens'. Not for me though, I sought a smooth, unobtrusive emergence. Subtle yet persistent was the strategy - 'Let it come to you...' my motto. I seized any and all opportunities to declare and assert my Queer identity, aided and facilitated with Queer icon badging, 'Gaying' up my cell bulletin board, notebooks, and other personal items, in the early weeks. Each a passive comment cue, primed to spark conversation. Slowly, awareness of my status spread. Feedback was mostly neutral, some positive, some negative. Then, in a burst of fun I fashioned a rainbow motif drawstring for my hoodie. This, some twenty-six cents worth of sneaker lace, a few brush strokes of watercolor paint, and I had something suprisingly unique.

In our drab and often monochromatic prison world, these twin rainbow strands, cascading from my collar to mid-chest immediately attracted a lot of attention. I found myself clocking the staff reaction to this. Technically, multicolored clothing is contraband. Maybe shoelaces and drawstrings fall in a grey area -but in prison, the rules are often, whatever the C.O.s say they are. I often walk a tightrope of 'doing me', and skirting hassles with security staff.

On the second day of wearing this overt rainbow flagging, a female C.O., Incidentally lesbian, was working my gallery. Telling her my cell number, she paused before pulling the unlocking lever. "Where did you get that?" She pointed to my decorated drawstring. I shrugged sheepishly, thinking about the contraband issue, and yet another disciplinary charge, maybe -and I was just coming off a 18 month SHU lockdown, results of NYSDOCCS retaliation for my PREA\*\* activism.

"Did you do that with markers?" She persisted. "No. paints." I answered softly. No other prisoners or staff were around, and I had begun to hope this was just casual curiosity. She made direct eye contact with me, a rarity, and asked boldly: "Are you LGBT?" An odd way to phrase this, as opposed to 'In the life', etc. I blinked.

"Yes." I answered, more confidently than I really felt. She smiled at me, and I returned a shy one. Relief washed over me, as she finally pulled the control lever.

I continued on to my cell, acting as if wholly unfazed by this interaction. But out of sight, I couldn't stop a big smile blooming. The tension waning, I realized that I had enjoyed the moment's connection with a community member. Regardless of our 'day jobs', and the other colors we wear as uniforms, we too are under the same rainbow. I take some solace, in still being able and human enough, to see past the uniform -on occasion.

While not every day will be under blue skies, as an openly Queer and transgender prisoner, I'm no longer living in fear. I'm learning to live again, as who I truly am, and that, regardless of these walls which surround me - is freedom.

\*Gender neutral spelling.

\*\*PREA: Prison Rape Elimination Act. (2003)