



PFLAG National Meeting — Debi Jackson

Good evening. My name is Debi Jackson. I'm the newly elected president of the Kansas City chapter of PFLAG, but I only attended my first PFLAG meeting around three months ago.

My best friend since starting the 8th grade in Alabama is a gay man. My husband's best friend since college is a gay man, and his husband became ordained to marry us ten years ago. Despite being a very conservative Republican and Southern Baptist, I never felt the need to attend a meeting anywhere to feel supported in accepting and loving these important people in our lives.

However, I'm also now the mom of two kids. My son is 8, but he'll tell you that he's practically 9 if you ask him. And I have a 7-year-old daughter called A.J.

**A.J. transitioned** – which means she changed her outward appearance from male to female and started living full-time as a her true gender — when she was four. At the time, she was enrolled in a preschool program at a local church and seemed to be the leader of the pack of boys that made up the majority of her class. She was very loud, aggressive, boisterous, and domineering. She was just what you'd expect a wild and unruly little boy to be.

*Except she wasn't really happy.* She hated going to school and fought it every day. Her once happy-go-lucky demeanor changed and she became an angry and physically aggressive child, punching, biting, and generally kicking the --BLEEP-- out of the other kids almost daily.

She was also becoming depressed and quiet at home. She asked questions about God and death constantly. She asked about different ways to die, which ones would be more painful than others. Bedtime prayers were filled with wishes to die so she could have a chance at a different life. Once when we were driving down the highway, she unbuckled her seat belt and tried to open her car door so she could jump out and be run over in traffic.

I know all of that sounds scary and possibly even unbelievable. ***After all, what 4-year-old child is suicidal?***



PFLAG National Meeting — Debi Jackson

Well, I can assure you it happened, and I can tell you that young kids experiencing severe Gender Dysphoria can become so depressed that dying seems like a better option than living while being seen by everyone around them as the wrong gender.

You see, during this same time...the last few months before her 4th birthday and just after it...she was also playing dress-up at daycare in a princess dress. She saw the same dress in the store once and asked me to buy it for her. My husband and I thought she was going through a phase of liking pink sparkly things, so we said no. We thought she'd become bored with it and didn't want to waste the money. But her teachers told us how much better she behaved when she had it on, so we knew that it made her happy. We bought it for her.

But there was more...She wanted to wear her new dress as a nightgown, to get more dresses, hair bows and headbands, pink shoes, and she refused to let me use the clippers to give her buzz cut hair a trim. She insisted she needed Rapunzel hair.

Shortly after turning 4, I noticed her pushing down on her genitals. She said they were uncomfortable and in the way. She didn't like how they felt and wanted them gone, immediately if possible. My head started spinning and all of these puzzle pieces started falling into place. I ran to the computer and did a Google search: 4-year-old boy says genitals should be gone. The search results pointed at one thing. My child might be transgender. A couple of weeks later, she told me very directly, "Mom, you know I'm a girl on the inside, right?"

Pediatrician, endocrinologist and therapist appointments all followed. The diagnosis was clear: Gender Dysphoria. The treatment was clear: social transition. We told our daycare director. She was amazingly supportive. The teachers were supportive. We expected some of the parents who had already noted her gender variance to be supportive. After all, they had said we were *great* for letting her explore her identity. But exploring and transitioning are two different things...and they didn't support the transition. Their kids, who had been fine at seeing her change from a boy to a girl, started coming in asking her to switch back. The parents stopped making eye contact and small talk with me. We were shunned.



PFLAG National Meeting — Debi Jackson

With her transition, we lost 95% of our friends, and my very religiously conservative family recommended some sort of reparative therapy and said they would pray for our souls.

*At the time in our lives when we needed support the most, we lost all of the support we had ever had.*

I looked for local transgender support groups and didn't find any. I knew the term "LGBT" included transgender, but when I asked our gay friends and our neighbors (a gay man on the left, a lesbian couple on the right), they said they had never met a trans person and they had more questions for us than answers. We have two friends — gay men, sex therapists — who also said they didn't know how to support us because they weren't familiar with trans issues.

I finally found one online support group for parents of transgender children, but the closest family in the group was a 5-hour drive away from us. We felt completely alone.

I would have given anything to know that PFLAG was trans-friendly and offered support to families like ours. But my Google search for "transgender support groups" didn't turn it up. And after not having any luck with our gay and lesbian friends and neighbors, reading the name "Parents, Family and Friends of Lesbians and Gays" didn't offer me any hope that we would find anyone in PFLAG who could relate to us.

2 1/2 years into our journey, I was able to give a speech about our experience. One of the producers of that event was a board member of our local PFLAG group and invited me to a meeting. When the video of the speech was put online, Liz offered to feature it in PFLAG's "A Note To My Child" campaign. From there it spread and I had families from across the globe contacting me to share their stories. When I went to that first PFLAG meeting, there was another mom of a trans child on the board, and 2 other families with trans kids were at the meeting. The T actually outnumbered the L, G, and B that day. I knew we would never feel alone again.

And that's why I'm now president of the chapter. The board members could see *my relief, my excitement, and my passion* for making sure that any other families like mine in our area wouldn't



PFLAG National Meeting — Debi Jackson

feel alone either. I can only look back and imagine how much easier those 2 1/2 years would have been if we had joined PFLAG sooner. Our future is going to be easier now that we are part of such a supportive group, and I am confident that as a part of PFLAG, we will be able to make future of many other families easier as well.

Thank you.