

Finding their identity

Library hosts discussion on transgender issues

BY JONATHAN PAPPALARDO
CLIPPER REPORTER

The Duxbury Free Library hosted a forum on gender identity Wednesday evening in the Merry Room.

The event, entitled, "Transcending Gender: a panel discussing trans lives, rights, and issues in the 21st century" featured panelists from SpeakOut Boston, a volunteer organization dedicated to combating prejudice against gay, bisexual and transgender people through speaking engagements designed as educational tools for the general public.

Three representatives from the organization, all of whom are transgender, shared their stories and answered questions from the audience. The panelists, who met at the event for the first time and varied in age, said they were speaking solely for themselves.

Connelly Akstens, a college professor, did not know her true identity until college. As a senior at the College of Holy Cross in 1968, she decided to apply for a Rhodes scholarship. To do so, Akstens needed a passport but did not have the required birth certificate to complete the application. At her mother's insistence, she sent her baptism certificate instead, which was rejected. When Akstens got a hold of her birth certificate, there was no first name or gender marker.

She started making connections with her personal behaviors and remembered having two surgeries when she was 4 and realized she must have been born intersex. Akstens lived with the isolation and shame of these gender issues for 65 years. "I was compartmentalizing my life," she said. "I was coping, learning skills used by con artists."

Anderson Clark, who did not realize he was transgender until he was 47, identifies as a trans man who was born female at birth. "I socially transitioned when I was 50 years old," he said. "I changed my name and the gender marker on my social security card, my license and my passport. I medically transitioned a few years later and was happy not living as a woman anymore."

The third panelist, Rosalind Imbaro, uses she/her pronouns since her transition from male to female in 2014 at 45. She recalls feeling severely depressed her whole life, unable to even look at herself when she was brushing her teeth. She described it "exhausting" to look in a mirror and not see what she thought she looked like.

Imbaro said puberty, a difficult time for the trans community at large, affected her grades and caused anxiety, a

feeling she carried into her 20s. She soon discovered cross-dressing but found herself shunned by the transex community. Imbaro is attracted to women, which in the 1970s and 1980s was forbidden in the transex community where you had to be "attracted to the other side," she said. She was barred and labeled a transvestite.

"We all try on identifications when we're growing up, looking where to fit in," said Rosalind Imbaro.

"We don't stick with one that doesn't feel right. No one does this because it's in, trust me. This is a pain in the butt."

The cycles of anxiety, depression and shame led her to self-medicate with hormones. To cope, she went into the male-dominated field of construction, where she focuses on bridge repairs, including the Powder Point Bridge, a job she has held for the last three years. At the time she wanted a family so she backed off the hormones, met her wife, "butched up a little," bought a house and had a son.

She was still feeling anxious and depressed in 2014 when the "transgender tipping point" occurred: Laverne Cox appeared on the cover of Time, Caitlyn Jenner transitioned, and "Transparent" premiered on Amazon. She cried through all 10 episodes, as the lead character was too scared to transition until age 65, a commonality amongst people of that generation, including Jenner. Imbaro's wife did not stay when she transitioned for real. Imbaro said Jenner and her lifelong struggles were a major inspiration in her decision to finally transition for good.

The discussion was opened for questions. An attendee asked about the implications of the media's influence on these issues, especially people

who may view the transgender lifestyle as a trend. "We all try on identifications when we're growing up, looking where to fit in," said Imbaro. "We don't stick with one that doesn't feel right. No one does this because it's in, trust me. This is a pain in the butt."

Another attendee is still learning the ropes three years after a close family member announced their transition. The same is true for an attendee who feels like they are learning a new language and having to make sense of pronouns since a family member came out just two months ago. "An important thing to remember is when people come out, it can seem like all of a sudden," said Clark. "People can struggle for years, decades. They just want to get to that place of peace. If people want you to slow down out of concern, that's one thing. If they want you to slow down for themselves, that's troubling."

Imbaro said the advent of the Internet has made making sense of life a bit easier. "You cannot identify anything without words. I went to college with no web. At 20, I did not have the right words. I might've been able to figure it out sooner, or transitioned earlier. Words and information are important."

DFL reference librarian David Murphy, who organized the event, said he hoped it was the first in a series of "Community Conversations" about important topics.

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