

# TRANS VOICES

## STORIES OF RESILIENCE, IDENTITY, AND ALLYSHIP

*The Our Fund Foundation is sponsoring an op-ed series in OutSFL Newspaper amplifying South Florida transgender voices to foster education, empathy, and allyship, especially as transgender people face increasing attacks. We hope these personal narratives will deepen understanding and strengthen support, contributing to a more just and inclusive South Florida for LGBTQ people.*

### **ABOUT THE OUR FUND FOUNDATION**

The Our Fund Foundation is South Florida's leading expert on LGBTQ issues, guiding philanthropy to build a thriving LGBTQ community. With \$25M in assets, it ranks among the nation's top LGBTQ funders and is the only LGBTQ-specific community foundation in the Southeastern U.S.



THE  
**OUR  
FUND**  
FOUNDATION

# REMEMBERING OUR ROOTS

## WHY EXCLUDING TRANS PEOPLE IGNORES OUR SHARED HISTORY

● Morgan Mayfaire

Before marriage equality. Before many cisgender, heterosexual people could openly acknowledge a gay or lesbian relative or coworker. Before “RuPaul’s Drag Race” brought drag into the mainstream. Before Pride was parades and parties — when it was an act of defiance. Back then, the gay club was our refuge, where we danced away fears, losses, and sadness. The Gayborhood wasn’t just a place; it was a sanctuary where we found community, built chosen families, and healed from a world that rejected us.

I’ve lived in a few Gayborhoods — near Christopher Street in New York and just blocks from the Castro in San Francisco. These places gave us belonging when our biological families wouldn’t accept us. But when we insulate ourselves too much, we risk losing empathy for those who aren’t exactly like us.

I remember when we fought for gay rights by presenting sanitized, “acceptable” images of white, cisgender men in polos, arguing, “We’re just like you — give us rights.” Even then, I believed our humanity shouldn’t depend on sameness.

Now, it feels like history is repeating itself in a darker way. I hear conversations like, “We should drop the T. They’re not like us. Trump’s



Photo courtesy of Morgan Mayfaire.

**THE GAYBORHOOD  
WASN’T JUST A PLACE;  
IT WAS A SANCTUARY  
WHERE WE FOUND  
COMMUNITY, BUILT  
CHOSEN FAMILIES, AND  
HEALED FROM A WORLD  
THAT REJECTED US.**

not after us — it’s them.” This rhetoric is dangerous and hypocritical. Trans people were there at Stonewall. They fought for the rights we enjoy today. And now, as they’re under attack, some of our own are turning their backs?

Our strength has always been in our

diversity and solidarity. We don’t need to be the same to see each other’s humanity. If we abandon that principle, we risk losing everything we’ve fought for. Let’s remember who stood by us when no one else would. Because when we forget our history, we lose more than empathy — we lose ourselves. [OUTSFL](#)



Morgan Mayfaire is the Co-founder and Executive Director of TransSOCIAL, a non-profit serving TLGBQ+ folks in the South. His passion for building acceptance and equality for Trans people in society guides his work in the community.

[transsocial.org](http://transsocial.org)



# THE WORLD IS QUICKLY MOVING BACKWARDS

## WE NEED EACH OTHER NOW MORE THAN EVER

 Tatiana Williams

Growing up in the '80s and '90s in Liberty City as a Black Transwoman was challenging. At the time, there were no role models, no media representation, and no organizations to support Transgender individuals. In my eyes, all we had was each other, "Black Transwomen trying to survive."

Integrating into the broader LGBQ community was always a struggle and often left us feeling extremely segregated. There was also a lack of understanding and education around HIV/AIDS. As a result, I lost many sisters to the disease and other health complications. Unfortunately, many of us were denied healthcare, job opportunities, and access to education, not because we lacked talent or drive, but because we had no voices, and the world refused to see *us*.

By the late '90s, it became even more dangerous for Transwomen of color. As silence and disregard for our community grew, violence did too. One night, while out with friends, I witnessed the targeted



Photo courtesy of Tatiana Williams.

shooting and murder of my best friend. That moment profoundly impacted the direction of my life and became a driving force behind my advocacy.

In 1998, Trans Day of Remembrance was established to honor those who have been murdered because of transphobia. By 2012, I had lost countless sisters to gun violence, often linked to survival sex work. I felt lost and afraid, but I knew I had to change my life. My work is rooted in the life I've lived and the struggles I've witnessed. I'm committed to creating the kind of world I needed when I was younger, one where we are safe and free

to live as our authentic selves.

Today, Black Transwomen continue to be disproportionately murdered, as documented year after year by the Human Rights Campaign.

Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera paved a path of resistance and fought for all LGBTQ people. People often ask what drives my work. My truth, I was once the girl we are trying to save. In 2016, The Pride Center gave me an opportunity that changed my life, and I carry that legacy in my work. As Executive Director of Transinclusive Group, I am dedicated to building a better future for our siblings. [OUTSFL](https://outsfl.org)

**I'M COMMITTED  
TO CREATING THE  
KIND OF WORLD  
I NEEDED WHEN  
I WAS YOUNGER,  
ONE WHERE WE ARE  
SAFE AND FREE TO  
LIVE AS OUR  
AUTHENTIC SELVES.**



Tatiana Williams is the Executive Director & Co-Founder of Transinclusive Group.

[transinclusivegroup.org](https://transinclusivegroup.org)





# LIVING UNAPOLOGETICALLY

## WHY TRANS COURAGE CHALLENGES A COMPLACENT SOCIETY

● Misty Eyez

I have always lived my life unapologetically; first “Gay & Proud,” and then, “Trans & Proud.” I am still proud, but now I am more afraid than ever. Trans rights are under unprecedented attack, as lawmakers push policies that specifically target us. I wonder why my, or our, existence provokes such fear and hostility.

I might have an answer: are others afraid of the fact that we challenge the status quo? We actually have the audacity to stand up for ourselves, to say, “This isn’t working for me,” and to actively change our circumstances. Most of society, even when deeply unhappy, remain complacent, trapped in bad marriages, unfulfilling jobs, or familial obligations they never chose yet feel obligated to maintain. The courage it takes to be transgender — to literally move mountains — is both inspiring and unsettling to those who have never dared to do the same.

I was listening to a podcast where women discussed what they did for fun. One woman shared that she enjoys watching

**THE COURAGE  
IT TAKES TO BE  
TRANSGENDER  
— TO LITERALLY  
MOVE MOUNTAINS  
— IS BOTH  
INSPIRING AND  
UNSETTLING TO  
THOSE WHO HAVE  
NEVER DARED TO  
DO THE SAME.**



Photo courtesy of Misty Eyez.

her boyfriend play video games. What? Has she convinced herself that settling is easier than seeking fulfillment? This reminded me of societal expectations imposed upon us all. However, Trans folx refuse to conform to these norms, often at great personal cost. We are willing to risk family rejection, friendships, job security, and even personal safety to live authentically. That kind of courage is revolutionary — and obviously, to

some, deeply unnerving.

For me, authenticity was never optional. I had to be me, despite standing over six feet tall and weighing over 300 pounds — a frame that society would never associate with an “ideal” woman. Yet, I refused to let societal definitions dictate my identity. I chose to live authentically, even when it meant defying the world’s expectations of what a woman “should” be. [OUTSFL](#)



Misty Eyez is a dynamic keynote speaker, educator, and fierce advocate for LGBTQ+ inclusion, known for blending wisdom with wit to transform hearts and minds through authenticity, humor, and unapologetic truth. She currently serves as the Director of three life-changing programs at SunServe, supporting and empowering marginalized communities.

[sunserve.org](https://sunserve.org)





# MY EDUCATIONAL JOURNEY

● Franchesca D'Amore

When I was a little kid, I was unapologetically curious and colorfully authentic until I was told to dim my feminine light. I was that nerdy kid who excelled in academia. Despite constant bullying and abuse at home and in school, I was able to somehow focus on my studies. School became my constant in life. In junior high, I was selected to be one of the first students in North Miami to be enrolled in an Advanced Placement (AP) Program. I was so proud to be taking college courses while in ninth grade.

I managed to graduate high school early and soon after found myself on the streets as a homeless queer teen. I had become part of the estimated 38% of transgender and nonbinary youth who experience homelessness.

I knew that I was trans at a very young age, but I come from a generation that didn't even know that such a thing existed. I'm grateful that transgender and nonbinary lives are part of mainstream modern life, even as we fiercely fight for equality. For much of my life, I tried to fit into whatever boxes I needed to fit into. I dealt with stagnating depression, homelessness, discrimination, and so much self-loathing.

I managed to achieve many wonderful things even without an education; I know many successful people who achieved their dreams without a formal education. On my

**I KNEW THAT I WAS  
TRANS AT A VERY  
YOUNG AGE, BUT  
I COME FROM A  
GENERATION THAT  
DIDN'T EVEN KNOW  
THAT SUCH A  
THING EXISTED.**



Photo generated by Adobe Firefly.

journey, my education was always in the back of my mind, but never quite within reach until the day that I decided to transition. At the age of 45, I decided that I needed to listen to that once unapologetically curious and colorfully authentic kid. I vowed to create my own box and define my dreams on my own terms.

I know what it means to be alone and misunderstood. That's why I advocate for young adults who want to live out their educational dreams. That's why I founded TransEd. One of our clients recently wrote this: "Being a part of this program has changed my life in ways I didn't think were possible. It helped me believe in myself and my future again. My tutoring sessions have shown me that school doesn't have to be grim or scary. It can actually be fun and exciting and comfortable. It makes a huge

difference knowing someone truly cares. I finally feel seen and supported in a way I never expected, all thanks to TransEd."

We offer GED certifications for young adults age 18-34 where we provide new computers, books, supplies, exam fees and weekly private tutoring. We meet our clients where they are and work through the program at their pace. We also offer annual scholarships for higher education programs. This year, we're proud to be awarding four college/vocational school scholarships totaling \$12,500.

As for me? I completed my BA with honors and on August 1, 2025 I will graduate from Florida State University College of Law with my Juris Master in Health Care Regulation. This one's for all the colorful kids who were told to dim their light; keep on shining, my brilliant LGBTQ+ siblings! [OUTSFL](https://transed.org)



Franchesca D'Amore is a transgender advocate, holistic life coach, diva extraordinaire and the Founder and President of TransEd ([transed.org](https://transed.org)).

[transed.org](https://transed.org)



# BEYOND THE UNIFORM

MY JOURNEY THROUGH GENDER, GRIEF, AND THE TRUE MEANING OF MASCULINITY

● Manëesh Chatman

As a 10-year Army veteran, the majority of my growing-up years were spent in the military. The year 2016 was my first year on testosterone and also my last full year contracted with the military. I started my testosterone journey on the black market and was the only 135-pound “female” who carried the heaviest weapons, the most ammunition, and always scored above 300 on my physical fitness tests. The other females in my unit had a running joke every time we took photos — it was always, “let’s get the females and Chatman for a photo.” It was as if they saw or knew who I was before I knew myself, but I kept that side of me hidden, afraid I’d be discharged until “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” was lifted.

In 2017, I learned I could go legal and get my testosterone from the VA medical center — the same year my brother passed away. So while I was becoming myself, I was losing a huge piece of myself at the same time. Before he left, I asked him how he would feel if I started taking testosterone, and he said, “It would be like the brother I never had.” Him being the only boy, I battled with the feeling that I was replacing him, and I stayed away from my family for five years following his passing.

**MASCULINITY ISN'T  
ONE-DIMENSIONAL.  
IT'S A SPECTRUM  
— EXPANSIVE,  
EMOTIONAL, SOFT,  
STRONG, QUIET, BOLD,  
AND EVERYTHING  
IN BETWEEN.**



Left: Manëesh Chatman Pre-T, Military “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” era.  
Right: Manëesh / Emperor, eight years, Walking Their Truth

Being pushed into manhood because of the beard I grew, the muscles I had, and the deep voice I grew into, I couldn’t understand why I was so angry all the time. I was “passing” as a man — I had the image I always wanted, and I was being accepted by the LGBTQIA community — and most importantly, by the T — until I realized I wasn’t living my truth as a nonbinary, genderless person. Every space I found myself in seemed to be performative, a way to fit into the world’s view of what a man should be.

Being nonbinary, trans, and masculine is a deeply personal and sometimes tender journey. The spaces created for us — especially within transmasculine groups — don’t always feel as open or affirming as we hope. Too often, they carry unspoken pressures to prove our masculinity or perform toughness. But masculinity isn’t one-dimensional. It’s a spectrum —

expansive, emotional, soft, strong, quiet, bold, and everything in between. We deserve spaces that hold us in our entirety — where we can ask questions, be uncertain, and show up in our unique expressions of masculinity without needing to prove or perform. Spaces where we can just be. There is strength in vulnerability. There is power in authenticity. And there is real healing in creating room for all of who we are.

Harmonizing Masculinity Collective is an initiative started within Transinclusive Group. We focus on supporting the entire ecosystem of the transmasculine community. We provide access to aligned prevention services, linkage to care, mentorship, community-camaraderie events, wrap-around support/services, provider education, trans focused training, and overall visibility for the trans/masculine community in South Florida and neighboring states. [OUTSFL](https://transinclusivegroup.org)



Manëesh Chatman is an Army veteran, community advocate, and Co-founder & Director of the Harmonizing Masculinity Collective. As Executive Director of Love and Light: Internal New Consciousness, Manëesh is committed to creating spaces for healing, amplifying transmasculine voices, and helping others reconnect with themselves through community, conversation, and care.

[transinclusivegroup.org](https://transinclusivegroup.org)



# WALKING BESIDE, NOT AHEAD

## MY JOURNEY SUPPORTING SOUTH FLORIDA'S TRANS COMMUNITY

● Shelley Goren

About three years ago, I was approached by The Our Fund Foundation with an unexpected invitation. According to CEO David Jobin, I was the “most perfect person” to help launch a new initiative focused on the transgender community. Why me? In David’s words: I’m straight, married, white, mature (a.k.a. “old”), and most importantly, a trusted, longtime LGBTQ ally. And, truth be told, I have a very hard time saying “no” to David.

My first assignment was to get to know the trans nonprofit leaders in Broward and Miami-Dade Counties and facilitate a group conversation about the challenges they face. So, I dove in. I attended a town hall panel at ArtServe, where I quickly realized I might be the only person in the room who fit David’s description. I was well outside my comfort zone, especially when I recognized one of the presenters as someone I had worked with in the past, never knowing he was a trans man. It was a profound moment of realization.

Since then, five dedicated trans leaders have willingly come together in conversation with me. Our meetings have been candid, ongoing, and deeply educational. Through

**... I DON'T WALK IN MY TRANS FRIENDS' SHOES. WHAT I CAN DO IS WALK BESIDE THEM WITH COMPASSION, EMPATHY, AND A WILLINGNESS TO SPEAK FROM THE HEART.**



Photo via Adobe Firefly.

them, I’ve gained not just insight into their work and lives, but also an opportunity to reflect on my own assumptions and role as an ally.

As I continue to listen, learn, and grow more comfortable, I also recognize how much I still don’t know. I’ve learned about pronouns, bathrooms, and sports; about gender-affirming care, workplace discrimination, and the horrific violence disproportionately impacting Black transgender women. I follow the headlines — on legislation, hate crimes, homelessness — and I do my best to stay informed.

But I don’t walk in my trans friends’ shoes. What I can do is walk beside them with compassion, empathy, and a willingness to speak from the heart. When given the choice between being right and being kind, a person rooted in humanity chooses kindness.

A straight ally supports equal civil rights, gender equity, and LGBTQ social movements — not because they have to, but because it’s right. They advocate for others and choose humanity above all else. I don’t know exactly what impact my allyship will have, but I know I’ll stay the course.

Will you join me? [OUTSFL](#)



Shelley Goren, a long time LGBTQ+ ally, is currently a non-profit consultant. She was the CEO of Gilda’s Club South Florida and served as Chief Development Officer for Children’s Home Society and Broward House. Shelley is a member of the Fort Lauderdale Community Services Board and The University of Miami Patient and Family Advocacy Committee.

Our Fund





# GETTING PAST MY DYSPHORIA

● June Raven Romero

By the time I was 10, I'd stand in front of mirrors for hours, scrutinizing my face as I saw myself slip away. "Who's that boy?" I'd wonder.

At 12, I confided to my best friend that I felt like a girl.

"That's... crazy," she responded, as she let out a laugh and walked away, forever.

At 14, I donned a spandex bodysuit for the first time, a costume piece for a high school production.

I felt amazing in it, until a castmate cut me down.

"You have the most feminine body and the most masculine face I've ever seen combined."

My dysphoria spiked.

Again, deflated.

Discouraged.

Derailed.

At 15, in drama club, I overheard the upperclassmen rehearsing a scene. In it, a high school reunion unravels when an alumni turns out to be transgender. "Stephanie" was crudely revealed as "Steven." Chaos and laughter ensue. "That's me, isn't it? Just comedic relief."

**AT 23, AFTER MANY YEARS OF ANGUISH AND A SUICIDE ATTEMPT, I TOOK MY FIRST DOSE OF HORMONES, AND I HAVE NEVER LOOKED BACK.**



June Raven Romero as an obsessed Elvis fan club president in Juggerknot Theatre Company's immersive "Conjuring the King," performed in 2024. Photo courtesy of Scott McIntyre.

At 16, I caught a glimpse of hope. A good friend of mine invited me over and dressed me in drag. She did herself up, and we created a funny video for YouTube. Her character's name was Mia.

Mine was June.

I recognized myself again.

Night came, and we packed June away. My parents would be by for me shortly.

At 23, after many years of anguish and a suicide attempt, I took my first dose of

hormones, and I have never looked back.

Allyship, community and medical care save the lives of LGBTQ people every day. Across the country, organizations like Callen Lorde and Mayfaire Medical are fighting to ensure that our care is protected and here to stay.

Let it be known that we are queer Americans, the likes of which ignited the global movement for gay rights, and the time has come to make history again. [OUTSFL](https://outsf.org)



June Raven Romero is an actor, performing artist, writer and transgender community advocate born and raised in Miami, FL. A first generation citizen of the U.S., she is of Cuban and Nicaraguan descent. Her work and passions span a wide range of skills and fields, including facilitating TLGBQ+ Cultural Sensitivity Trainings with TransSOCIAL.

[transsocial.org](https://transsocial.org)



# FROM TOMBOY TO TRUE SELF

## A DECADE INTO MY TRANSITION

 **Zahne Williams**

I was born and raised in Fort Lauderdale, Florida — sheltered, bookish, and without the language to describe what I felt inside. As a kid, I always played the “dad” when my sister and I played house. I didn’t know why — I just knew bows and dresses weren’t for me. I wanted cornrows, Jordans, and basketball shorts. Eventually, people called me a tomboy. Still, I didn’t yet know what LGBTQ meant.

By high school, I understood I liked girls, and I was terrified. A freshman, barely 75 pounds, just learning what “gay” was — and realizing I was one of them. I kept to myself. When college didn’t feel right, I moved to Atlanta at 18, searching for community. Atlanta was a revelation: my first drag queen, my first trans friends. It’s where I met Buddy, who said, “I’m FTM, and I think you are too.” I started binding. I already looked like a teenage boy. For the first time, I felt seen.

After returning to Florida, I joined the Army, served in Germany, and traveled Europe freely as my authentic self. My identity was never an issue among fellow soldiers. But after sustaining a severe shoulder injury saving another soldier, I was medically discharged in 2014.

**MY FAMILY  
DIDN'T LOSE A  
DAUGHTER—  
THEY WATCHED  
ME BECOME  
WHO I ALWAYS  
WAS.**

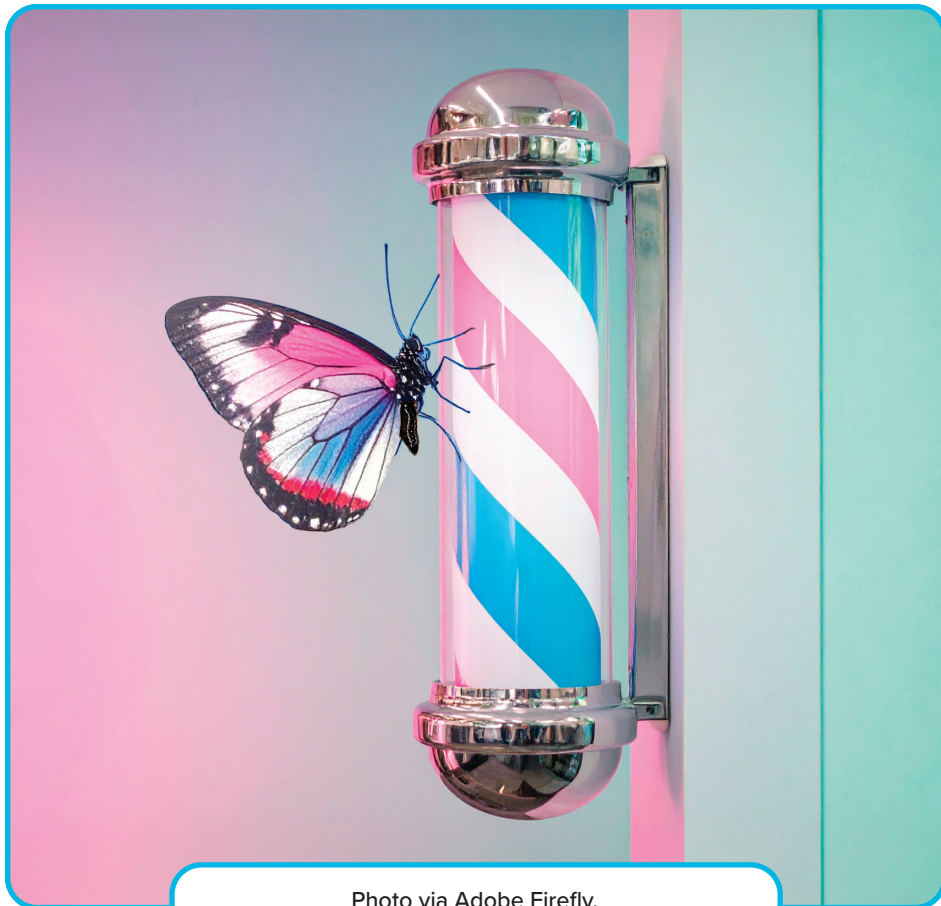


Photo via Adobe Firefly.

Through the VA, I learned I could medically transition. I started testosterone in 2015 and told my mom — who remembered Buddy from years earlier. At first shocked, she asked for information. My sister accepted me easily. My dad was the hardest to tell — but his response stunned me. After reading my letter, he texted: “I’m updating my will. What’s your full name now?” He took it better than anyone.

I always looked up to my dad and granddad — their suits, manners, presence. I wanted to be like them. Now, 10 years into my transition, I’m a barber who loves suits, ties, and driving my wife everywhere. I became the man they could be proud of. My family didn’t lose a daughter — they watched me become who I always was. As my niece once said: “You were just a caterpillar becoming a boy butterfly.”

OUTSFL



Zahne Williams is a transgender community case worker at The Pride Center at Equality Park and Mr. Trans Extravaganza title holder through The McKenzie Project Inc. pageant. Born and raised in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida he has been working in advocacy and community for almost five years helping those who may need housing, name/gender marker changes, or job placement.

[transinclusivegroup.org](https://transinclusivegroup.org)





# BREAKING THE BINARY, BUILDING THE FUTURE

● Misty Eyez

I recently found myself traveling alone to speak at a conference and looking for a friendly breakfast table. Spotting a group of “queer-looking” folks, I asked to join them. Shortly after I sat down, someone passing by said, “Misty, I loved your workshop on resilience last year! Are you speaking again this year?” I smiled and replied that I was leading two sessions: one on allyship, and another titled “Understanding Your Trans Clients and Coworkers: The Who, What, Where, When, Why, and the Science of Trans.”

When the passerby left, one of the men at the table said bluntly, “I don’t believe in pronouns.” I paused, debating whether to point out that “I” itself is a pronoun. His colleague chimed in with: “What I don’t understand is why some clients come in as ‘he’ one day and ‘she’ another. I don’t care which you are, just pick one.”

I then asked if they’d ever been close to someone LGBTQ, sharing that I claimed to be “bisexual” for four years, because it felt safer than saying “gay.” I then explained that



Photo via Adobe Firefly.

**LIKE A TURTLE  
HIDING IN  
ITS SHELL,  
THEY NEED  
PROTECTION  
UNTIL IT’S SAFE  
TO EMERGE.**

many trans clients show up in “boy mode” for safety, especially when using public transportation. Like a turtle hiding in its shell, they need protection until it’s safe to emerge. Should we shame them for that? Or should we, with compassion, create spaces where they feel safe enough to try new pronouns and identities?

Unfortunately, transitioning isn’t done overnight, instead it’s a lengthy, difficult, and expensive journey. However, when society embraces gender diversity, it benefits ALL humans. For decades, rigid expectations

told men they couldn’t cry and women they couldn’t lead. Trans and nonbinary people challenge those roles every day simply by existing. By stepping outside of these outdated scripts, we’re proving that gender is not destiny, it’s expression. Trans liberation isn’t just for trans people it is a blueprint for human freedom. Every time we resist conformity and live authentically, we create space for others to do the same, including little boys who secretly want to play with dolls, and little girls who really want to play football. [OUTSFL](#)



Misty Eyez is a dynamic keynote speaker, educator, and fierce advocate for LGBTQ+ inclusion, known for blending wisdom with wit to transform hearts and minds through authenticity, humor, and unapologetic truth. She currently serves as the Director of three life-changing programs at SunServe, supporting and empowering marginalized communities.

[sunserve.org](https://sunserve.org)





# WHAT RESILIENCE LOOKS LIKE FOR ME

● Tommy J. Murrell

I'm a Black, queer, Latino trans man living in Florida, where the political climate feels like it's always set to hostile. Every headline reminds me that people like me aren't just debated — we're targeted. Still, my life is full. I've got love. I've got support. I've built a community that holds me up. That's not because I'm trans — but often, in spite of it.

Resilience holds it all together. Not the hashtag version. The kind built from showing up daily — for myself, my body, my business — when the world gives me every reason not to.

I started my own business to cut through corporate red tape. It's not just work — it's purpose. I bring my lived experience into the S.T.R.O.N.G. Men trauma-informed fitness class, into *Transcendence*, a group I facilitate, and to every session with my fitness clients. I create space for people to be their full selves — even those who don't look like me, live like me, or vote like me. Because resilience isn't just surviving — it's helping others heal, too.

I don't advertise my identity through my brand. It keeps most hate away — but not



Photo via Adobe Firefly.

**THE GYM GAVE ME  
SPACE TO BREATHE  
AND RECLAIM A  
BODY THE WORLD  
KEEPS TRYING TO  
POLITICIZE.**

all. It still stings when people you thought were kind show you they're not. And even as a naturalized citizen, I live with the reality that ICE makes mistakes. Being queer and trans only increases the risks. My safety, like so many others', is never guaranteed.

That's why bodybuilding became part of my safety plan. The gym gave me space to breathe and reclaim a body the world keeps

trying to politicize. Lifting grounded me. Gave me power. Helped me carry myself with clarity and confidence — on the street, in rooms, in life.

Some days the weight feels like too much — literally and emotionally — but I lift it anyway.

That's what resilience looks like to me.

OUTSFL



Tommy J. Murrell is the founder of 3TFitness Lifestyle, where he provides trauma-informed fitness coaching and community support. He facilitates the S.T.R.O.N.G. Men program and *Transcendence*, creating spaces where people can show up fully as themselves. His passion for resilience, healing, and equity guides his work with clients and community.

# FROM STRUGGLE TO ADVOCACY

## A TRANS WOMAN'S JOURNEY

● Angel Perez Duran

I grew up across Miami, Boston, and Forest, Mississippi. My classmates in Mississippi hurled spitballs at me and called me “the nigger’s child.” But my father, who described himself as *un negro japonés* Cuban—a Black, Japanese-eyed Cuban—never understood that my lighter skin or his heritage did not shield me from prejudice.

Our neighbor, Mrs. Love, told me the hard truth: mixed children like me aren’t hated for our beauty; we’re ridiculed because we embody what society fought so hard to keep apart.

But beyond the racial struggles, there was the visceral knowledge that I was in the wrong body.

My godmother, who raised me, couldn’t wrap her mind around what was happening inside me and what I was doing to live my truth. So she kicked me out—and never let me forget that I was what she had “thrown in the trash.”

There I was, just 13 years old, struggling at the intersection of race, gender dysphoria, and abandonment.

It wasn’t until I attended José De Diego Middle School and Booker T. Washington High that I found some stability. By then, I

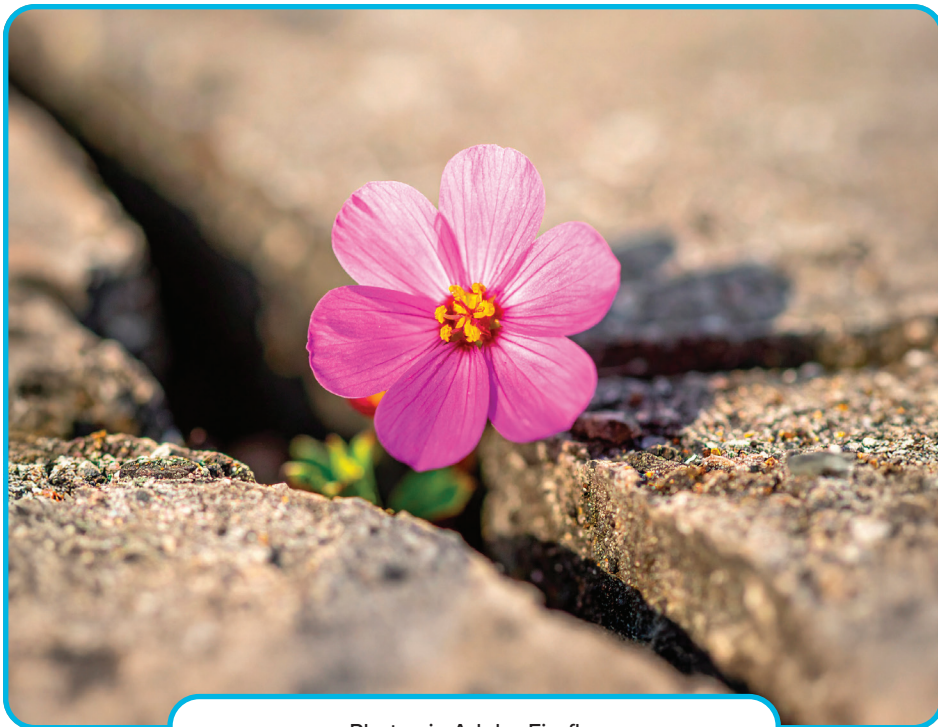


Photo via Adobe Firefly.

had been on puberty blockers and had begun hormone replacement therapy.

High school was where I visibly blossomed, though I still hid in plain sight to protect myself. At that time, representation of girls like me was reduced to caricatures on sensationalized talk shows. I refused to accept that narrative.

I was 17 when my father died, and it fell on me to care for my younger brother. I worked as an exotic dancer to cover our rent and my tuition at Miami Dade College. It was challenging, but I did not break—I broke through.

Today, I’m an advocate—certified event

interventionalist, certified recovery peer specialist, paralegal, and aspiring attorney.

I do this work for my community. For my Black and Brown sisters, who have been systemically oppressed, routinely persecuted, and ridiculed for not conforming to Eurocentric beauty standards. For the young trans women blossoming right now, who cannot yet see their own beauty, as I once could not see mine. To break generalizations and curses placed on our community. To change lives.

My testimony is not one of defeat, but precedent. Proof that survival, faith, and advocacy can rewrite the record. [OUTSFL](#)

**MY TESTIMONY IS  
NOT ONE OF DEFEAT,  
BUT PRECEDENT.  
PROOF THAT  
SURVIVAL, FAITH,  
AND ADVOCACY  
CAN REWRITE THE  
RECORD.**



Angel Perez Duran is a paralegal, Certified Recovery Peer Specialist, and entrepreneur with 17 years of experience. Angel is dedicated to bridging legal support, wellness, and community advocacy. She is passionate about fostering healing and empowerment in the lives of others.

# THE FREEDOM OF BEING SEEN

RECOGNITION, RESPECT, AND SELF-LOVE HAVE TAUGHT ME THAT I AM ENOUGH—JUST AS I AM

● Speyder Webb

My name is Speyder Webb, though most people who know me call me “Spidey.” I identify as a gay trans man when I’m educating and engaging in community events; otherwise, I am simply a man. As a community advocate, I care deeply about the health and well-being of the TLGBQ+ community and our allies.

To answer the question, “What is it like to be a trans man?” — it isn’t easy, especially when you’re not fully seen as a man.

Growing up without the internet made it difficult to find others like me or even language to describe how I felt. I only knew that I was uncomfortable in my female body, rejecting it like a square peg forced into a round hole. Even after multiple surgeries, I still experience dysphoria. Surgery can change your body, but it doesn’t silence the internal voice when you hear yourself speak or look in the mirror.

What makes it harder is living in a community where others have watched your transition yet still don’t treat you as an equal. Gay men, for example, sometimes fail to see me as a man, even though I have the same body parts. That’s one reason I left Wilton Manors for Miami.

At the same time, I’ve found joy in

**SURGERY CAN  
CHANGE YOUR  
BODY, BUT IT  
DOESN’T SILENCE  
THE INTERNAL VOICE  
WHEN YOU HEAR  
YOURSELF SPEAK OR  
LOOK IN THE MIRROR.**



Photo via Adobe Firefly.

moments of true recognition. Whether traveling, speaking at events, or even relaxing at Haulover Beach, it feels affirming when strangers call me “Sir” or “Papi,” treating me like any other gay man or hairy bear. I want to be approached as a man, not as a fetish. Sometimes I need to leave my local community to experience that acceptance.

The hardest part of being a gay trans man is often accepting myself. Even now, I fight

the inner voice that whispers, “You’re not a man because you were born female.” But I remind myself that acceptance is something even cis men struggle with.

My final words are these: be true to yourself. Treat your body as a temple, inside and out. Use self-affirmations. And remember, anyone who doesn’t respect you doesn’t deserve your breath or your presence. [OUTSFL](#)



Speyder Webb is a Community Leader in the TLGBQ+ community. He is an artist, writer, educator, empathic energy witch and an avid networker who believes in the power of connecting with individuals inside and outside his immediate circle.

[transsocial.org](https://transsocial.org)





# A SURVIVOR'S FEAR IN TROUBLED TIMES

 **Rajee Narinesingh**

As a 58-year-old transgender woman of color, I feel incredibly fortunate to have reached this age. I've faced immense injustices, including employment and housing discrimination, and medical disparities that led to dangerous black-market injections. I've survived three violent physical attacks.

In the 1990s, after one attack left me with two black eyes, a split lip, and bleeding, I lay in bed weeping, questioning why I was transgender, almost blaming myself for the violence. By the grace of God, I escaped. That night, I could have easily died. It was then I resolved to dedicate myself to activism, to improve conditions for the transgender community.

When I saw momentum building for trans civil rights, a profound sense of relief washed over me. It felt as though our collective blood, sweat, and tears had not been in vain. For a time, I felt relatively safe venturing out in public.

However, the current backlash my community is experiencing has brought back a deep sense of fear. I now feel like a target when I go out. I'm terrified of how much



Photo via Adobe Firefly.

**I'VE BEEN BLESSED  
WITH A LIGHT  
THAT, DESPITE MY  
OBSTACLES, HAS  
ALLOWED ME TO  
CONNECT WITH SO  
MANY IN LOVING AND  
UPLIFTING WAYS.**

worse this could become, and I question: Do enough people care?

Since childhood, I've always approached the world with a smile, driven by a desire to positively impact others. I've been blessed

with a light that, despite my obstacles, has allowed me to connect with so many in loving and uplifting ways. But now, I wonder if my light is bright enough to pierce these incredibly dark times. [OUTSFL](#)



Known for her television appearances on shows like Dr. Phil, Botched, and Trisha Goddard, Rajee has used her personal story with black-market injections to educate and save lives worldwide. Her activism extends to film roles, musical singles like "Stumble," and a memoir titled Beyond Face Value, all of which showcase her unique mission to spread love and positively impact the world.

# BREATHING WHILE BLACK & TRANS

Jasmine McKenzie

As a Black transgender woman from Miami, my life is a testimony of survival, resilience, and transformation. From childhood, I carried trauma I never asked for, molestation, rejection from family, and verbal abuse that no child should endure. As I grew older, violence became familiar: I faced guns, robberies, betrayal from loved ones, and abandonment by people I once trusted. Survival was instinct. With no safety net, I turned to sex work, hustling, and whatever means kept me alive.

In 2010, the ballroom scene introduced me to the community, but it also exposed me to harsh realities. Drugs circulated freely, and I hustled, selling weed and coke, not out of glamour but necessity. Through betrayals and broken trust, I learned to build a chosen family and lean on those who stood by me. Fierce and unapologetic, I fought for myself and my community, carrying both scars and strength.

My HIV diagnosis was another turning point. For five years, I sank in denial, burdened by stigma, pain, and ignorance. Healing came only after I embraced care,



Photo via Adobe.

**I DISCOVERED THE  
TRANSFORMATIVE  
POWER OF BEAUTY.  
DEBBIE, ESPECIALLY,  
TAUGHT ME HOW  
STYLING COULD  
RESTORE DIGNITY  
FOR PEOPLE WITH  
ALOPECIA AND  
BEYOND.**

giving me not only survival but purpose. This shift led me to rediscover myself as more than a hustler, I was a creator.

Hair became my craft and my calling. Learning from icons like China the Hair Designer, Paulette and Felicia Green, and ultimately Debbie Scissorhands, I discovered the transformative power of beauty. Debbie, especially, taught me how styling could restore dignity for people with alopecia and beyond. From her, I absorbed the lesson that creating beauty could also be an act of survival and healing.

My story is filled with racism, homophobia, transphobia, homelessness, and violence, yet it is also rooted in resilience, chosen family, and growth. I did not let my hardships define my ending. Instead, I planted seeds in the cracks I was forced into, and those seeds have grown into a garden, both literal and symbolic.

This is what resilience looks like. This is the truth of a Black trans woman who refused to be erased, who transformed pain into power, and who chose to keep thriving against all odds. [OUTSFL](#)



Born in Liberty City, Miami, Jasmine McKenzie is a Black trans woman, HIV survivor, and founder of The McKenzie Project, leading transformative housing, advocacy, and healing initiatives that empower Black TGNCNB+ people to thrive with joy and dignity.

[themckenzieproject.org](http://themckenzieproject.org)

