

*"We have such rigidity of gender in our culture and its killing people, literally."*



We see a baby and ask "Aww...boy or girl?". But gender exists on a spectrum and for those not on the extremes it can be hard to find their place. At just five years old little Allisa began to refuse to wear Mom's homemade dresses.

*"That's the only way that my child brain could interpret or explain that I was gender variant/trans. I didn't know how else to express it."*

Today Allisa is comfortable in the middle of the gender spectrum, identifying as 'trans', gender variant, non-binary or genderqueer.

*"I'm not binary with my gender. I ask people to use a gender neutral pronoun such as singular 'they' or 'zhe', says Allisa.*

Growing up with conservative parents in small town Ontario meant that Allisa didn't have help in figuring out who zhe was and why zhe was different. So zhe says,

*"I just pushed it down, pushed it back, and unhappily survived".*

In Ontario 47% of Trans people have considered suicide, and over 75% several times. Mental health issues are 3 to 4 times higher than the average, with high homelessness, poverty and unemployment rates due to the stigma of gender diversity (called transphobia).

Accessing medical care creates a challenge for people like Allisa. Zhe wasn't transsexual, so most medical people didn't understand how to support zher gender. Service providers were really hesitant to approach the issue.

*"People get confused about pronouns. They think it's rude to ask directly. I call it 'the gender dance' when a person isn't sure so they just avoid eye contact. It's important to ask. You can't always tell how a person identifies by looking at them."*

Interactions with health care providers are often traumatizing. When Allisa asked a doctor about a possible hysterectomy zhe was shocked to be dismissed with, "You're not getting a hysterectomy, because you're having kids". After that zhe avoided the health system for a year until zhe found a new Doctor who had experience with gender diversity and who was willing to learn. Twelve years later Allisa's hysterectomy is finally scheduled. For many people in the Trans community, healthcare services are hard to find and access. The few services and programs that are available are quickly filled or geographically specific.

*"When Langs staff saw this gap in service, they decided to change that," Allisa says with delight, "but they didn't realize how many trans people actually needed medical support and they were kind of flooded with them, so they put a cap on it".*

When the cap created wait times, Langs, (in true innovative style), decided to create the region's first Gender Journey's Group. The group provides a wide range of education, information, and support about transition, coping with transphobia, mental health issues, and physical health issues. The group welcomes everyone regardless of how they identify on the gender spectrum. Peer training built into the Langs groups is also building capacity within the community itself.

For Allisa it's a very emotional experience. *"This is my tribe," zhe says, "my people who have been the most neglected and who don't have services. So to hear that going into our group changed them and helped them makes me teary. One person said to me,*

*"You are literally saving lives."*

*"We hear so much about the painful stories, however, there are folks that are having good experiences and we need to hear those stories as well. Transgender people are not just statistics. We're not a horror story of our neglected history. There's a lot to us, and it's a very beautiful thing."*