

## **The Real Me, by Sarah McBride**

This note has been a long time coming, 21 years, actually.

Today, I ended my term as AU's [American University] student body president. Being president has been an unbelievable privilege for me. I have learned and grown so much over the last year, both personally and professionally. As proud as I am of all of the issues we tackled together as a campus community, the biggest take-away, for me, has been the resolution of an internal struggle. You see, for my entire life, I've struggled with my gender identity.

And it was only after the experiences of this year that I was able to come to terms with what had been my deepest secret: I'm transgender.

For me, it is something I've always known, but had never accepted. It's been present my whole life, from as early as I can remember. It wasn't that I knew I was different, I literally knew I was a girl. I remember my friends dressing me up as a girl at four or five and just feeling a completeness that I didn't feel as a boy.

Around the age of six or seven, I was watching a sitcom with my mom when a transgender character appeared. Until this point, I thought I was alone and that there was nothing I could do about who I knew I was. I remember asking my mom what "transgender" meant. She explained it to me, and my heart dropped; I knew "that's who I am" and I knew I'd have to tell my parents someday.

At the same time, I developed my love of politics. And starting at six and seven, I wrestled with the fact that my dream and my identity seemed mutually exclusive; I had to pick. So I picked what I thought was easier and wouldn't disappoint people.

As I got older, became successful in politics, and expectations grew, the pedestal that I was on made it harder for me to come to terms with everything. As the years passed, my golden handcuffs grew stronger and stronger. I had everyone and everything telling me that I could really make it in politics. "What a privilege," I thought, "I shouldn't sacrifice that." I was also scared to disappoint the mentors who had invested so much of their time and provided me with so many opportunities.

To avoid letting myself and others down, I rationalized my decision: if I can obtain positions of power, make life a little fairer for other people, and make the world a little more accepting of different identities, then that work would be so compelling and fulfilling that it would make me feel complete and somehow mitigate my own,

internal struggles. I told myself that if I could make “Tim” worthwhile for other people by changing the world, that being “Tim” would have been worthwhile. I also thought that, on a superficial level, the perks and privileges of being an elected official would bring me some level of happiness that I couldn't otherwise achieve.

Then I came to AU and I became SG President. As President, for the last year, I've experienced a mock elected official experience. I realized that as great as it is to work on issues of fairness and equality, it only highlighted my own struggles. I also realized that I didn't care about the superficial things. I found no great happiness in the notoriety and the recognition. Finally, being the SG President gave me the confidence to disregard the petty things people say about me behind my back.

By mid-fall, it had gotten to the point where I was living in my own head. With everything I did, from the mundane to the exciting, the only way I was able to enjoy it was if I re-imagined doing it as a girl. I wasn't really living anymore. My existence was experienced through imagination. The world was passing by in front of me, but I wasn't engaging in it as the person I knew I was; my life was passing me by, and I was done wasting it as someone I wasn't.

And with those experiences, and that new confidence, I couldn't continue to rationalize to myself that it would get better by continued concealment. It would only get better if I came to terms with everything and began to live true to myself.

After confiding in two or three friends as I struggled through fall semester, I told my family and some of my closest friends over winter break. My brothers and parents greeted me with immediate support and unconditional love. Naturally, it was difficult for them. On one level, they had believed that they would never have to really worry about me, that I was pretty much set for life. This development rocked that sense of security and for the first time in my life, they worried about my safety, my professional opportunities, my acceptance, and my happiness. And on a deeper level, they felt like they were losing me.

Since that difficult first week, there is no doubt things have gotten better. My parents have seen that the child they know and love isn't going anywhere. My friends have been nothing short of exceptional. My parents' friends have embraced them and me. And we move forward as a family, closer than ever.

The last several months have really shown me a lot about my life. I learned what truly amazing family and friends I have. My news has been met, 100% of the time, with love, acceptance, support, and, in most instances, excitement.

In a similar vein, as difficult as this has been for myself and my family, the experience highlights my own privilege. From day one, I never worried about my family loving and accepting me. But for far too many trans men and women, the reality is far bleaker. Coming out oftentimes means getting kicked out of your home, your community, and your family. I also mentioned that this is the first time that my parents have had to worry about my safety, my job prospects, and my acceptance. But those worries are all too common for most families. I grew up in an upper-income household, in an accepting environment, and with incredible educational opportunities.

I say this not to diminish my own struggle and experience, but to acknowledge the privilege, support, blessings, and opportunities which have been afforded to me. I also say this to emphasize that this story is my experience and my experience alone. There is no one-size-fits-all narrative; everyone's path winds in different ways.

Today is the next day of the life I've already had, but at the same time, the first day of the life I always knew I wanted to lead. Starting on Saturday, I will present as my true self. Going forward, I ask that you use female pronouns (she/her) and my chosen name, Sarah. Over the last several months, I've begun to quietly make the transition. A month and a half ago, I started hormones. I've told most of my friends and have secured an internship for the summer at the Victory Fund, an organization that works to elect LGBT people to public office and one of the largest political action committees in the nation.

I'd love nothing more than to remain friends with all of you. I know this is new to a lot of people and I'm happy to explain my experience in more detail.

With every birthday candle extinguished, with every penny thrown, my wish was always the same. I am now blessed with the opportunity to live my dream and fulfill a truth I have known since childhood. My gratitude is great to my family and friends for accepting me as the person who they now know me to be, and for letting me show them the possibilities of a life well lived.

Yours,

Sarah

P.S. I now know that my dreams and my identity are only mutually exclusive if I don't try!