

## **A Mother's Story**

Sally McBride

Sally and David McBride's youngest child came out as transgender on Christmas Day 2011 as a junior at American University. The news rocked their world. Here is their story as told by Sally.

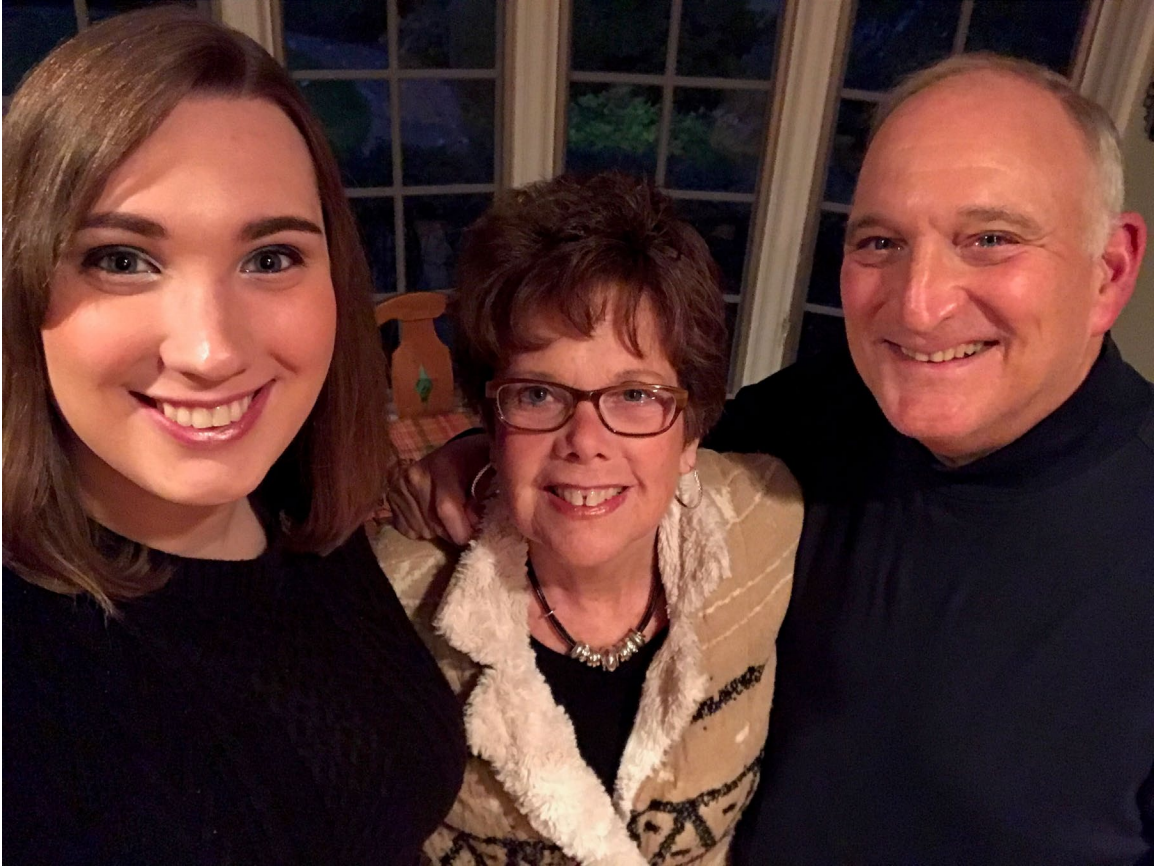
We have three children. Our oldest child, Sean, told us at his college graduation in 2003 that he was in love, but that it was complicated. He wasn't ready to give us the details. We told him that when he was ready, we would be there for him. Three months later, as a first year medical student, he told us he was in love with a man. We were shocked, but told him we loved and supported him. My biggest concern was that he would be defined by being gay; being gay is a part of who he is, but he is so much more. My husband was looking forward to being a grandfather, and Sean assured him that he wanted to have children. We weren't worried about his future, as he was at Yale Medical School on his way to becoming a doctor, and we knew many gays and lesbians who were happy, healthy and fulfilled.

And then on Christmas Day 2011, our youngest child, then a junior at American University, president of the student body, and who we believed to be our son at the time, came out to us as transgender. We were totally blindsided. I was devastated, crying uncontrollably. I saw my child's future crumble, feared violence and envisioned discrimination at every turn. Dave went online immediately to the National Center for Transgender Equality, one of the leading transgender advocacy groups in the country. When he read that more than 40% of transgender people attempt suicide, his heart dropped. But he also read that that with a loving and supportive family, that percentage drops in half. And with a supportive community, it drops even further.

We knew that we would support her and do everything possible to make sure that she felt loved and respected and that she would be safe. But this news was life changing.

My first response on hearing her news was, "please don't do this. I don't want to lose my son." Sarah responded with, "you are keeping your son, and gaining a daughter." Sarah was the name she gave us that first day - her true authentic self (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Sarah, Sally, and Dave



“Can’t you wait until you graduate?” I asked.

“No. I have waited 21 years to be who I truly am. If I wait any longer, I could become depressed, start using drugs or attempt suicide.”

Dave, Sarah and I spent the next three days talking. We asked our daughter question after question, trying to understand what she was going through, and what being transgender meant.

She explained that she had known since she was five years old that she was different, that she was a girl. In every dream, she was a girl.

At ten, while watching a sitcom with a transgender woman, she asked me who the woman was. It was the first time that she realized that someone like her existed. She wasn’t alone.

At 13, her love of politics blossomed while working as a volunteer on a political campaign in our home state of Delaware. As her passion for politics and her own political aspirations grew, she feared that her dreams and being transgender were mutually exclusive, so she hid her true authentic self. She appeared to be a happy kid.

Sarah explained that it was as student body president at American University starting in the fall of 2011, while working on such issues as gender neutral housing at an extremely diverse and inclusive school, that she realized that she needed to come out as transgender.

Our sons rallied around the three of us. Our middle child, Dan, assured us that he was straight, adding a bit of levity and humor to a difficult situation. And Sean and his husband immediately drove from Brooklyn to be with us. Though I would never equate the death of a child with this situation, I felt like I was losing my child. Over the next several months, I went through the stages of grief: first denial and anger, feeling sorry for myself, and pity, but finally acceptance.

During those first several days, Dave and I decided that we needed to be proactive in our journey to understanding what Sarah was experiencing, and making sure that she was healthy emotionally and physically. To that end, Sean reached out to one of the leading psychiatrists in this country who treats transgender children, Dr. Edgardo Menvielle, at Washington DC Children's Hospital, and set up an appointment for the three of us just five days after Christmas. Dr. Menvielle met with Sarah first, then Dave and me next, and finally the three of us together. He confirmed that Sarah was transgender, and that she did not have any other psychological issues other than the gender dysphoria. He felt confident that she could reach her full potential and that her future was still bright. For the first time over the last several days, he gave us hope for our child.

The following week, Dave and I met with two sets of parents who lived nearby who have transgender adult children. They were introduced to us by the pastors at our progressive Presbyterian Church. It was so affirming to meet parents who had made it successfully through this journey and whose children were happy. Sarah had gone back to college and begun to tell her friends and some professors that she was transitioning, and was met with total acceptance. But she wanted to wait to tell everyone until the end of her term as student body president on April 30. She didn't want her news to embarrass the school she had come to love. At home, we began to tell our extended family and close friends, and asked everyone to keep it confidential until Sarah gave us permission to tell all. I met individually and in small groups with my friends to tell them about Sarah.

This news is not something that is quickly told. There are so many myths and misconceptions about what it means to be transgender, and we felt it important to educate people on the facts. Dave told several members of his law firm, and we both told our closest friends at our church. We wanted to show our friends that we were proud of our daughter, respected her, and so admired the courage it took to be her true authentic self. It was important not to present ourselves as victims, but to present a united, loving and supportive family. We were met with nothing but acceptance.

I don't want to leave you with the impression that the several months after learning that Sarah was transgender was a smooth ride. As I mentioned, in the beginning I was angry. Sean called Dave and me every week the first several months to make sure we were ok. He knew Sarah would be fine but was worried about us. One day he called me and I told him I was angry and felt sorry for myself. I asked him what were the chances of having a gay and transgender child? At that time, he was doing a fellowship treating pediatric brain tumor patients. He replied to my question with "Slim, but what are the chances of a nine year old girl coming into my office with a terminal brain tumor? Your child is healthy and not going to die."

This was a pivotal moment for me. This put everything into perspective. Two more important events occurred over the next several months that helped to calm some of our

anxiety about Sarah transitioning. Sarah had worked for Delaware Governor Jack Markell during his election in 2008 and the two became very close. The Governor has been a mentor to Sarah ever since, and he and his wife have become friends of our family.

Three months after coming out to us, Sarah came out to the Governor and his wife and asked the Governor to write one of two recommendations for Sarah for her application to become an intern at the Obama White House. The Governor wrote the recommendation, and both he and his wife offered their unyielding support for our family. Sarah's second recommendation written by Attorney General Beau Biden. Sarah had worked for Beau when he ran for Delaware Attorney General in 2006. Both were such affirming moments. Sarah got the internship, and was the first transgender woman to work in the White House.

In early April, Sarah announced her plan to come out on Facebook and in the school newspaper on the last day of her term as student body president. We were very concerned that coming out on Facebook would make her too vulnerable. When she assured us that her psychologist was on board with this plan, we supported her decision to do so. On April 30, both the Op-Ed in her school newspaper and the post on Facebook were met with mostly positive reactions. The post went viral, with so much support from all over the world.

As a family, Sarah, Dave and I lobbied for the Gender Identity Non-Discrimination Bill in the Delaware General Assembly from January to its passage in June of 2013. It was important for us to do this as a family, so the legislators and the community could see us as a loving family, with a child who possessed the same hopes and dreams as any other child, and who wanted to be treated with fairness and dignity. In 2016, Sarah was the first transgender person to speak at a national political convention when she spoke at the Democratic National Convention. So many transgender people have said that seeing her announce that she is a "proud transgender American" gave them hope for their future. In 2018, Sarah published her first book, Tomorrow Will Be Different: Love, Loss and the Fight for Trans Equality.

Finally, I would be remiss if I didn't mention one of the most defining experiences of the past seven years (and of our entire lives): Sarah fell in love with Andy Cray, a transgender man, and one of the leading LGBT health care advocates in the country. While working at the White House, Sarah met Andy at a pride reception. For him it was love at first sight. It took Sarah a little longer to realize she was in love with him, too.

Andy was brilliant, thoughtful, kind, and lit up a room with his smile. They moved in together nine months after meeting. One month later, Andy was diagnosed with cancer. Sarah became his main caregiver after his surgery and while he underwent radiation and chemotherapy. She showed the same courage, strength and resiliency in helping Andy recover that she showed in coming out and transitioning.

Four months after finishing his treatment, Andy was cancer free, but three months later he learned that his cancer had returned, and he had twelve months to live. How does a 27-year-old face his imminent death? With the support of family and friends, with guidance and advice from Sean, who is now a radiation oncologist, with immeasurable fear, and with the hope that he could beat the odds.

As it became increasingly clear that Andy's cancer was more aggressive than previously suspected, he asked Sarah to marry him. Dave and I gave our blessing. With the help of friends on both sides, Sarah and Andy married on the rooftop of their apartment building, on a beautiful summer day, surrounded by fifty family and friends. For Dave, walking Sarah down the aisle was one of the proudest moments of his life. For all of us, the ceremony was both beautiful and tragic. Four days later, Andy died.

It has been more than seven years since that Christmas Day in 2011. We have been so privileged and blessed to have been embraced and supported by so many. Ours has been such a positive journey, and that journey continues. Sarah has become one of the leading transgender advocates in the country through her work at the Center for American Progress, and since 2015 she has been the National Spokesperson for the Human Rights Campaign. Our daughter has experienced more in the past seven years than most people do in a lifetime. Her courage and resiliency continue to astound us. Dave and I speak about our journey to churches, companies and community groups, continuing to educate and dispel misinformation. And in the summer of 2016, along with three other mothers of transgender children, I started a support group for parents of transgender kids that meet at our local children's hospital. We are so privileged and blessed as a family. And each day, we celebrate our diversity as a family, too!

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