

Coming out: Local person helping trans people and their families

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
November 15 2017 10:36 AM



ALTON - November is Trans Awareness Month, which honors many people's acceptance of identity, but many people are still struggling for that acceptance from their families and communities.

Some do not even have support networks due to the judgement for their identities received by those in their lives who are supposed to love them the most. Ericka Harley, 42, said she knew she wanted to be a male when she was only 12 years old (Harley told a reporter from Riverbender.com to use that name and feminine pronouns for this story). When she came out at 18, she said many people were not accepting of it. She remembers that feeling as she helps many people - especially young people - and their families take the steps toward coming out to the world and acceptance.

Harley runs an ear-to-ear open forum at the Alton YWCA every third Thursday of the month for people working toward coming out into their genders and sexuality. She said the forum is also open to heterosexual cisgender (meaning they identify as the gender they were assigned at birth) people as well. She said many people, including family members of people coming out, have a lot of questions and even some difficulty accepting their loved ones' identities. This forum is designed to help ease that difficulty, and to build a support network for people who may otherwise feel isolated.

"I think people need to be able to talk about coming out with people, especially when they are starting that process," Harley said. "I'm someone who's been through it. When I came out at 18, it was a much different time. There was not as much acceptance - especially coming out in the black community."

When she told her loved ones she felt as if she wanted to be a male and live her life as such, Harley said they were not accepting. She said they have since come back into her life, but added it was a difficult process with lots of loneliness and loss along the way.

An Altonian by birth, Harley said she was born deep within the church community, saying her family was incredibly active in that. As time has passed, she said Altonians have become much more accepting, but found many churches have yet to reach that level of tolerance and acceptance.

The youth Harley assists through the program are as young as 13, she said. She said she knew of some children who were even younger already aware of their gender.

"A lot of kids are six and seven years old, and are asking their parents to dress up like little boys and girls, and some parents are incredibly understanding and go with it, but some of them tell them no and try to force them into what they want them to be," Harley said.

Common problems with trans acceptance, she said, include families feeling a sense of regret their little boy or girl does not identify with the gender roles expected and enforced on them. That stifling continues into teenage years and young adulthood with

bullying and being forced to hide one's identity to be accepted. Despite the social progress being made, Harley said bullying is still one of the main issues trans kids face today.

Because of that, Harley is hoping to take her message into the school systems. She feels as if children who are trans need to have a safe way to come out, and be guaranteed their right to live their lives unmolested by the opinions of others. She also feels bringing her message into the school system will help those who may otherwise bully better understand what their fellow classmates are experiencing.

Harley operates her mission in the Levis room on the first floor of the YWCA from 6-7 p.m. every third Thursday (including tomorrow). It is open for anyone to attend.