

LoudounNow

VOL. 6, NO. 34

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JULY 15, 2021

'I Want You to Call Me Max Now'

Family Embraces Life with Transgender Child

BY HAYLEY MILON BOUR
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Seven-year-old Max is bounding around the monkey bars at Dinosaur Park in Ashburn on a Tuesday afternoon in June. He's just about sweat through the T-shirt with "He, Him" written on the front. He's got on black basketball shorts, as basketball is his favorite sport. The playground is practically empty. It's the kind of outside heat that prompts most kids to go to the pool instead of to the playground. Max leaps down from the jungle gym and flashes a thousand-watt grin, but it's missing a few light bulbs.

"The tooth fairy left me seven dollars," Max announced, pointing to the gap in his teeth.

His mother Emily nods and smiles on, confirming the going rate for baby teeth tucked under pillows.

Max turns back to the jungle gym.

"Stay where I can see you," Emily tells him, with every hint of worried-mother in her voice.

Emily's worries exceed what most mothers endure, though. When her baby was born, she was handed baby Sophia. Through toddlerhood, Sophia showed a preference for "boy toys" and sports.

"I was like 'oh OK it's just a tomboy phase,'" Emily recalled. She continued to offer dresses and dolls, thinking Sophia would eventually show interest. Reality sunk in on Father's Day of 2019 when Sophia was five years old.

"We were out to brunch, and the waitress was like, 'oh he's so cute with his long, luscious hair,' and I didn't correct her. That's



Douglas Graham/Loudoun Now

Max, a transgender student entering second grade next month, plays at a playground in Ashburn.

when it really sunk in for me that this isn't a phase, his wanting to be a boy and dressing as a boy."

It never occurred to Sophia that she was anything other than a boy.

"If I say the word 'transgender' he doesn't know what it means, he doesn't know he has a label," Emily said.

In the summer of 2019, the family was binge watching the series "Stranger Things." A character on the show appealed to Sophia. The character was Max, a young red-headed girl. The androgynous name was a novel and exciting concept for Sophia.

"Mommy, I want you to call me Max now," he said.

The family began to tell friends and

family that Sophia was to be called Max. Everyone in the family's circle obliged, with no protest or pause.

He loved bow ties, which he would pair with a button-down shirt to make a "handsome outfit," as he calls it.

"It looks awesome!" he said after seeing himself in his very first handsome outfit.

Emily started trashing the girl clothes in the closet.

As Max entered first grade at his Aldie elementary school, Emily and administrators hatched a game plan for the school year. He would use the boys' bathroom, but only after a teacher ensured it was empty.

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Input Sought on Renaming Rt. 50, Rt. 7

BY RENSS GREENE
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While the first meeting of the Rt. 7 and Rt. 50 Renaming Task Force was set up as a briefing on the process for coming up for new names for Harry Byrd Highway and John Mosby Highway, and the county has just begun gathering public input on new names, the committee's debate over those new names has already begun.

Members of the committee last week debated whether they should take names of individual people off the table, with several worrying naming the roads after specific people could put Loudoun County in the same situation in the future.

"That's why we're here in the first place, because we may pick names and in 20 or 30 years, you might get somebody [who] doesn't like those names," said committee member and former Planning Commission chairman and Heritage Commission member Cliff Keirce. "So, I think we should just avoid that potential problem in the future."

A debate on one name in particular followed after committee member Daniel Eisert suggested George C. Marshall as a likely candidate for the honor. Another committee member, nonprofit founder and former Library

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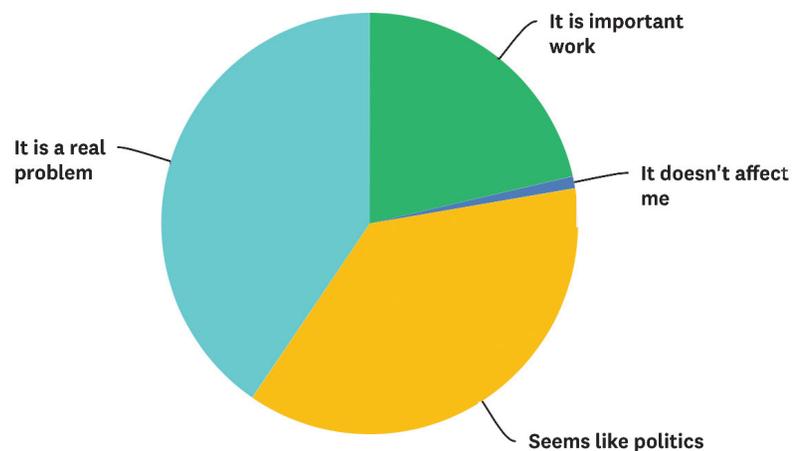
The Best Choice for Roofing Replacement



Readers' Poll

LAST WEEK'S QUESTION:

What's your view of the debate surrounding the school division's equity initiative?



THIS WEEK'S QUESTION:

How should Rt. 7 and Rt. 50 be renamed?

Share your views at loudounnow.com/polls

Transgender kids

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First grade went smoothly, and Emily was confident Max was in good hands with his teachers in Loudoun.

Culture War Fodder

The identities of children like Max came under fire in Loudoun County this past May, when Tanner Cross, an elementary school PE teacher, told the School Board that he wouldn't affirm a transgender child using their preferred pronouns.

"It's lying to a child; it's abuse to a child—and it's sinning against our God," Cross said.

The School Board had been going through a review process of Policy 8040, which provides protections for transgender and gender expansive students.

Although such protections for students aren't novel in the county—Policy 1080 already accommodates many needs of trans students—the district is required to implement a thorough policy to comply with a new Virginia mandate. Proposed Policy 8040 is largely the same as the model policy the Department of Education drafted.

The School Board received complaints from parents about Cross' comments, including families of five of Cross' students. Administrators placed Cross on paid leave. The conservative Christian advocacy nonprofit, Alliance Defending Freedom, took up Cross' cause and sued for his reinstatement. ADF alleged that the school division violated Cross' First Amendment right to critique the policy. Loudoun Circuit Court Judge James Plowman granted the reinstatement. In an appeal to the state Supreme Court, the district argues the teacher's right to free speech does not supersede schools' responsibility to protect students.

Cross' case impelled conservative crusaders across Northern Virginia to join an existing effort to remove School Board

members—a campaign that began months prior over the district's handling of learning during the pandemic.

Activists in blue T-shirts reading "Let Tanner Teach" became fixtures in the School Board meeting room and at demonstrations over the summer. Conservative media outlets nationwide showed Cross' remarks and shared his story, many offering contortions of the events and the School Board's handling of the matter.

"I love all of my students and treat them with dignity. There are some things that I can't do because of my faith," Cross told *Loudoun Now*.

Cross also said that his belief that "a biological boy can't be a girl, and vice versa" is not based on experience or exposure to trans people.

The case has moved through the court system, and arguments will be heard in the Virginia Supreme Court in coming months.

Building a Support System

"I didn't want this to happen," Emily said while sitting at a picnic table, worry furrowing in her brows. Max was on the swings doing cherry bombs, yelling for his mother to look at how high he was getting.

"Do people actually think I want to go through that? It is going to doctor's appointments, it's putting him on hormones, he's going to be putting needles in his body, possibly undergoing surgeries, who knows?"

Emily is a Trump-supporting, conservative Christian—antithetical to most LGBTQ champions—and never foresaw the uncertain path that her son now faces. When she realized her family would be a "trans family," she became an enthusiastic LGBTQ ally, watching documentaries, researching doctors, and reaching out to transgender members of the community for support.

"I have tons of friends and family members who I've changed that perspective for them. Some of them have never come

"I hate that it's this divide. It doesn't need to be, I don't understand why it's always political."

— Emily

across a transgender person or experienced one or met one. They're glad they can learn from this. I hate that it's this divide. It doesn't need to be, I don't understand why it's always political," Emily said.

What gripped her most strongly was the specter of Max's mental health taking a turn if he didn't feel supported.

"I'd rather have a trans son than a dead daughter," Emily said.

Statistics from a 2020 study by The Trevor Project, the largest U.S. survey of transgender and nonbinary youth, found that 60 percent of trans and nonbinary youth had engaged in self-harm, and more than half reported that they had seriously considered ending their lives.

Cris Candice Tuck, a transgender Army veteran in Leesburg, is an active member of the trans community, and has befriended Max and Emily. Tuck is gender fluid, and didn't transition until his 30s.

"Max's existence destroys every single argument you could make about trans kids. There's nothing sexual, nothing perverse or corrupt about his existence. He's just a kid. The idea that he's somehow doing this for attention, or political cause, or perversion, it's all just so laughable," Tuck said.

Tuck wrote an impassioned letter to the School Board after Cross' comments.

"It can make you feel like the best choice in the world is to disappear. So for a child, I

can only imagine it amplifies those feelings times a thousand," he said.

Tuck said having an affirming parent and supportive community is invaluable in preventing the worst.

"When you're that age, your trust is put in the adults around you. And when you feel a certain way and you feel you're a certain gender, you believe that," Tuck said.

Dr. Karen Gail Lewis, a family psychologist and social worker in Silver Spring, MD who was a trailblazer in studies of gender identity, watched as media outlets tossed around the transgender issue.

She said that having affirming role models is the most crucial factor for the mental health of transgender children to thrive.

"The alternative is you can be traumatized and kill yourself because there's no support," Lewis said. "It's not just the parents, but the larger community around that kid."

The Future for Trans Children

"He's a laid-back kid. He loves playing tag, playing video games with his dad," Emily said while pushing Max on the swings.

Emily's personal creed is to not live in fear. While she worries about Max dealing with bullies and possible medical procedures, she knows she can't control what happens outside of her home.

She can't help but wonder, though, what would happen if one of Max's teachers refused to affirm who he is.

"I was going through his backpack the other day and I found a sheet with his favorite things. He wrote that his favorite class is PE. What if he had been in that class?" she said.

The late afternoon sun is still beating down through the trees by the time Max has had about enough of the swings.

"Mom, can we go to the pool tonight?" he asks. He adds a "Please?" for good measure. ■

The last name of Emily and Max was withheld at the family's request.