

My name is Kimberly Shappley. I was born an army brat in Alabama and raised in the south, am a middle school nurse, an ordained evangelical minister, and the proud mother of a beautiful transgender eight-year-old girl named Kai. I grew up in northeast Mississippi on the land my great grandparents settled when they came to America. As an adult, I relocated to Brazoria County Texas. My family and I lived in Pearland, an ultra-conservative area that was once a great fit for my strong evangelical faith and tea-party ideology, until we moved two years ago.

You see, because of my faith and background, I was not always accepting of the fact that my daughter is transgender. Nor did my heart and mind change overnight about lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people. It has been a years-long process that only happened because of Kai.

Before the age of two, Kai's mannerisms were notably feminine. When she was two, Kai chose female playmates, traditionally female roles while playing, and toys traditionally for girls. Immediately, I intervened. I requested that the daycare put away the girl toys so Kai couldn't play with them. But by three years old Kai was telling anyone who would listen that she is a girl. That's when I implemented a home-remedy version of conversion therapy based on counsel I had received from my family and friends, who are also devoutly religious. I hated every minute of it but felt a responsibility to save my child's soul from hell. Things changed for me when I overheard Kai praying for Jesus to take her home to be with him forever. That's when I allowed my knowledge of science and psychology to finally override my poor theology. I remembered the data on suicide risk for transgender youth whose gender identity is not supported by their families. So Kai socially transitioned at four and a half. For Members who may not know: transition for a child means they pick out clothes they feel comfortable in and we use pronouns that validate her. It does not mean that a child has surgery or takes medication.

Around the time Kai socially transitioned, President Obama issued guidance for schools to let transgender children use the bathrooms that match their gender identity, a hopeful development. At first, I thought nobody had to know Kai was transgender. I spoke to Kai's school principal about respecting that privacy and allowing her to use the girl's restroom before she started school. But that could not remain a secret in a small town. Nor was it authentic to who Kai is.

Our district superintendent compared transgender people to pedophiles and polygamists in a statement he gave to the Pearland Journal. Texas Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick told district superintendents not to follow the Obama guidance. Can you imagine being the parent of a child that was referred to in this manner by the leaders appointed to serve and protect her?

The result, for my daughter, was a terrible school environment. At 5 and 6 years old, Kai was frequently locked out of the only restroom she had access to, leaving her to have accidents in front of her peers. It also taught her that the adults around her at school were going to consistently fail her. She was frequently reminded of her birth name by certain staff members, even by one of her teachers. This was obviously intentional and cruel behavior. Peers bullied her and called her a boy with little or no intervention from school staff, until one day she came home and told me she couldn't take it anymore. I relocated my family two weeks later to Austin, leaving the area I had known for more than 25 years to save my daughter. To this day, I have friends and family who I do not communicate with because I accept my daughter.

When I entered the office to enroll my children in school in Austin ISD we were welcomed by a sign tacked to the office bulletin board that read: "We are proud to be a safe, supportive and inclusive campus!". I began to weep. For the first time in a long time, I felt my daughter was safe with the adults I was leaving her with. Her first day of school she came home and ran upstairs to write in her diary because she "had the best day ever." She had freely used the appropriate restroom at school. In Austin ISD, parents don't complain. Classmates invite her for sleepovers and their parents allow them to have slumber parties at our home. The school district leadership has set a standard that has shaped an entire campus to be kind and truly inclusive of all children. Almost immediately, the teachers and principal made note of Kai's gifted intelligence. Her former school district had been so focused on her gender identity that they never noticed, nor cared to notice her high IQ.

I currently work with Equality Texas as Faith Outreach Coordinator and frequently speak at press conferences, give interviews, and have speaking engagements in conservative spaces. I consider my philosophy as an activist one of the most important things I've learned as a nurse. I advocate for children who depend on my knowledge and skill set to educate people by meeting

them right where they are. Because of the mindset I overcame, I am uniquely qualified to do this. This philosophy has made me a successful advocate and mom.

But I won't always be here to protect my daughter. She, trans kids like her, and LGB kids, need the Equality Act because they deserve a future where they won't experience discrimination at school, when they apply for a job, or rent an apartment. Our country had determined long ago that discrimination is wrong. Choosing to exclude people for how they were born is not an American value. We must do better. I welcome sincere questions and appreciate open dialogue, even if we may disagree. Thank you for inviting me to share our story.