

ADVANCING ACCEPTANCE Q&A

The Berman-Ruths on parenting, their journey, and their transgender son, Xander

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Your son, Xander, is transgender. At what point did you first notice he identified as a boy, even though you thought you were raising a daughter?

When Xander was four, he asked for a haircut. He had long, beautiful blond hair at that time. I brought him to a salon and they gave him a bob. When they finished, and he looked sad, I said, "Do you want bangs?" They gave him bangs and then they spun him around in the chair and he had started to cry. He said, "Like a boy." I told them to cut it short and he was so happy. His haircut was kind of like Mia Farrow's in *Rosemary's Baby*. He looked great, and it gave me an early sense that life as a boy just made so much more sense to him.

What are some ways you've supported Xander over the years?

We believe it starts with acceptance and trying to put ourselves in his shoes—and often. Not just in elementary school, but during all those life events and into the future. Also, we've found that parental advice, with openness, goes a long way to address life challenges. Oh—and a sense of humor!

We've supported Xander in his kung fu—he is now a second degree black belt. We encourage his friendships and support him in all of the day-to-day trials and tribulations he goes through—both as transgender and just being a teenage boy. And we support him in his interests, like going to see live music, watching movies together as a family, getting the books he wants, etc.

In what specific ways did you support Xander's gender expression?

As parents, the first step is accepting and actively taking part in a child's gender expression, creating a safe space from which to learn and express oneself. This is as much a truth in first grade as it is today. For Xander, in particular, providing the space and openness to him wearing boys clothes, becoming a black belt, coaching him on little things like a more masculine handshake, as well as things like haircut and body language tips.

How did you navigate extended family relationships to make it safe for Xander to come out?

When Xander was 13, he was concerned how his grandfather felt about the fact that he is transgender—in particular, the fact that his grandfather was not referring to Xander with male pronouns. We reassured Xander. But in the end, I recommended that he should write his grandfather a letter sharing with him his journey and wishes. It was a very understanding, beautiful letter Xander wrote, and today they have a wonderful relationship. Eli still gets frustrated with himself when he messes up pronouns sometimes, and Xander

is very understanding. He really appreciates the effort, and they have had good conversations between the two of them. It's a good lesson for advocating and owning one's identity and journey.

How supportive has Xander's school been?

Excellent! They were unconditionally helpful. We worked with the school very closely over a series of meetings with teachers and administration for the school. The administration informed all his teachers and ensured he could use the same school facilities as other boys. In fact, it was one of Xander's teachers who initially suggested that we have his name legally changed; someone had accidentally called him by the wrong name, and the teacher saw first-hand how Xander's heart sank. Overall they've been incredibly supportive.

How do you build community for your family?

A lot of it is about enabling both of our kids to have their friends over and by keeping in close touch with our adult friends. The Wileys (*Mike and Margaret*) are like second parents to Xander and Zuni—and we feel that we are for Lucas as well.

Has Xander ever been mistreated because of his gender identity?

Yes. In elementary school Xander was bullied by two classmates. The school used the opportunity to provide transgender awareness and anti-bullying discussions for the kids. We also talked to the parents to help them understand what happened.

What are your hopes and dreams for Xander as he finishes high school?

Good grades, acceptance into a good college media program (which is his dream), and the unfettered continuation of his journey—personal, social, career, love, and identity.

Any final thoughts?

We are so proud of our son. He is compassionate, thoughtful, kind, intelligent, is passionate about life, is an incredibly good and loyal friend, and a wonderful human being! We're most proud of how he balances on the one hand advocating for himself and his identity, while being very compassionate and understanding of friends and family as we all learn together.



To see the video featuring the Berman-Ruth family, visit:

www.AdvancingAcceptance.org