

Jenn Stanley: For Rewire.News, I'm Jenn Stanley and this is Choice/Less.

Robert DeLeo: Today I'd have to say is one of my proudest moments as Speaker of the House.

Jenn Stanley: That's Massachusetts House Speaker Robert DeLeo. He's a Democrat from Winthrop.

Robert DeLeo: And when you look back at the history of Massachusetts, and I'd like to say in terms of civil rights and what we have done, and you consider the fact that this is just another great moment in our history.

Jenn Stanley: It's June of 2016, and he's talking about a bill they just voted to pass that expanded civil rights protections for transgender Bay Staters.

Robert DeLeo: And I can't tell you how proud I am of the great vote that we had here today.

Jenn Stanley: But not everyone was happy. Religious conservatives who don't support LGBTQ rights opposed the law, and have tried to get it repealed.

AD QUOTE: "It means any man who says he is a woman can enter a women's locker room, dressing room, or bathroom at any time. They gained enough signatures for a ballot referendum to do so by telling constituents that it allowed sexual predators to stalk victims in public bathrooms. And if you see something suspicious and say something to authorities, you could be the one arrested and fined up to 50 thousand dollars."

Jenn Stanley: In the upcoming midterm election, Massachusetts voters will decide. A yes vote keeps protections in place for transgender Bay Staters, and a no vote overturns the law, taking away these protections.

Late last summer, I was in a Lyft with a driver named Rachel Brown. She's a retired engineer who lives in a Boston suburb. She wanted to talk to me about Question 3. I thought listeners might be interested in what she had to say, so I caught up with her a few weeks before the election. This is her story.

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Now, here's Rachel.

Rachel: The first thing I do when people get in the car is I greet them. I say, "Hi. I'm Rachel, and I'll be your Lyft driver today," and they get in. It's usually an exchange of pleasantries, and then at some point on the ride, I'll ask them if they're Massachusetts voters, and if they say they are, I will say, "Well, I'd like to talk to you about Question 3. It's going to be on the ballot on November sixth." Basically I tell people that it's a referendum on a law that was passed two years ago that gave transgender people equal rights in this state with everybody else

in public spaces, and that if it's approved, the transgender rights will stay in place and we'll continue to enjoy equal rights. If you say no, then we'll rescind that law and potentially take away those rights.

And then I pull out my thing here, and I show them this. It's a plaque that I carry. It just says, "This November, vote yes on 3 to defend dignity and respect for transgender people in Mass." I'll tell them that's a smaller size version of the placard that I carried in the Pride parade, and sometimes the conversation from there will go in any number of directions. I don't particularly try to lead it beyond that, but if they want to talk about what it's like to be transgender or any of that stuff, I talk about how it is to be a transgender person, and how I lived many, many years as the guy, and how I was just not fulfilling myself, as like living in black and white, whereas once I transitioned full time, I was able to achieve a level of happiness that, to be honest with you, I didn't know existed before.

We were living in England when I started school, because Dad was in the Air Force, and at five years old I started school, and they had to come in and drag me out of the girls' bathroom, and were trying to tell me that I wasn't supposed to go in there. I'm like, "Really." I thought I was being punished. I thought I had done something wrong, and so I used to not go to the bathroom at school.

Back then, there were no words to describe it. He's just different. Just different, and first grade was when I really found out I was different.

Dad found out, and tried to beat it out of me, which is in true military style. After two sessions like that, my mother intervened, and I'd be at home and she'd come running in and hand me a truck and say, "Your father's on his way home. Play with this." When I would be into her clothes, and makeup, and stuff like that, she would just say, "Hey, put that back," or, "Don't do that. That's my favorite. Leave it alone." But she would never say no and say it was forbidden or whatever, or punish me over it. It was always you just need to keep this close and not tell people. I was okay with that.

Like any other kid, I wanted to make my mother happy and my dad. I wanted to fit in with my peers. I didn't want to be that different kid, and you really do try.

I was outed in the seventh grade. A friend of mine and I ... Well, he was a friend. We were playing dress up, and he attempted to rape me, and I screamed and his mother came in, and I got in trouble, because I was wearing his sister's dress. He didn't get in trouble at all for holding me down and trying to take advantage. But that's just the way the culture was back then. It was traumatic, no question about it, and then he proactively outed me in the seventh grade, so I wouldn't out him. I got beat up a lot. The teachers would turn their backs back then, and my dad would be, "You got to stand up for yourself. You got to fight back," and this, that and the other thing.

That's not a solution, but the silver lining was I started hanging out with the nerds in school. When you're different, you tend to gravitate towards a group like that, because they are more accepting.

But then you go to college. You start experiencing alcohol and other things for the first time, and, yes, you have a few slip ups here and there. It was still a problem even then.

So I got married in that time frame. Had two lovely daughters. She actually didn't know until near the end.

Jenn Stanley: Your wife?

Rachel: My first wife. Actually our marriage fell apart for other reasons. I have a second wife as well. Technically we're still married.

We were having an argument one night about something not related to that. So I went in the back room as I normally did and sat at my computer behind the desk. That's my space, and that night she actually followed me in there and continued the argument, and she kept asking me what was wrong. I was like, "Nothing. No big deal, whatever. I'm dealing with stress," and blah, blah, blah. She kept pressing, and this night she was not going to give up.

So finally I told her. It's the only time since I've met her that I've ever seen her totally speechless for a number of minutes. She had no idea, believe it or not. I still don't see how that happened, but I guess maybe I was a little bit better at hiding things than I thought.

Jenn Stanley: Were you surprised that she had no idea?

Rachel: Yes, I was surprised, because I had come into the house at other points in time, and she would look at me and she goes, "Are you wearing eye makeup," and I would look at her and I would go, "Yeah," and she would just laugh and turn away. So she didn't want to know, because we could have had the conversation then under much more positive conditions.

It was about 12 or 13 years ago that I was really, really struggling with my identity. I had taken to taking extended time after work under the guise of I have to work over, or I'm going to see a supplier, stuff like that, and so I started dressing more, and living with the fear of discovery and all that sort of stuff, and at one point, I was suicidal.

I actually found the Tiffany Club in Waltham, and I called up and they have an open house on a Tuesday night, and I went there, and I met Grace Stevens, who is my savior, and she kind of dragged me back from the edge and said, "You need to go see a gender therapist. You need to start doing things in your life to understand this and see where it's going," because at that point I was confused.

I was just ready to say it's not worth it. What am I doing? Why am I here? What am I doing? What am I living for, feeling this conflict and it's called dysphoria is what they call it. It's nasty. It's anxiety. It's depression. It's just feeling terrible about yourself.

So she dragged me back from the edge, and she set me up with a gender therapist, a great lady. She helped me a lot in terms of coming to terms with what was going on with me. You don't walk in there and sit down and she, "So you're a girl." You walk in there, you sit down, and you start talking about how you feel, where you're coming from, and what the conflict is inside, and she says, "You can come here and you can dress while you're here," which I used to do. It was very relaxing, and you just feel grounded. Being able to share with people was amazing, because I had never been able to do that before, and knowing there are other people like me, and being able to share with some of those people and see how common the feelings are, and how common the life stories are, it was like a breath of fresh air. It truly was. It truly opened my eyes to what was going on and the world of possibilities that were around me in terms of transition.

Now, here are people that are actively transitioning that are taking control of their lives, and some of them were living full time at that point as their authentic selves and stuff, and you talk to them and you get a sense of a direction, and a sense of how they managed in their lives, and what brought them there and what they're doing.

Having a group like that is just critical, absolutely critical, and that's one of the things that I think, as a society, we really need to make sure that's available to especially children that are coming up that need the support. They need the support of their parents. Their parents need the support of other parents that are dealing with it, and the kids need support from each other and from people that are going through it as well.

That was the turning point. That truly was the turning point for me. After that point, I knew that I was going to be okay.

I think I had a guy's orientation, because if you approach it from a girl's orientation, girls somehow would sense that, and they would not respond. So try to be a little bit more crude around the edges and approach it more from a guy's angle, which I had plenty of role models for that, and I was successful.

My therapist, who is one smart lady, told me that one of the reasons I chose Debbie as my wife, and by the way, it's 35 years we've been married, was that somehow I sensed that she would make me stay in the guy persona, that she would be very conservative about that stuff, and that she would really struggle with the girl aspects of my personality. She was right.

Jenn Stanley: Where did your wife think you were when you were going through therapy and all of that?

Rachel: Well, she got involved with the therapist as well. I didn't want to tell her at first, and my therapist is like, "You really need to tell her." I was like, "Ah." So September 5th last year was my first day driving as Rachel. It was absolute magic, absolute magic, because I realized that there was no going back to the guy stuff.

My wife, she had a therapist. I had a therapist. We had a couples therapist involved. But essentially she can't live with a woman, and I just couldn't be the guy anymore, and essentially we're trying to stay friends. It's difficult. But I'll go see her tomorrow. Once a week I go down there.

Jenn Stanley: Will you be slowing down your political pace depending on how this referendum turns out?

Rachel: Well, I think some of it will certainly take the pressure off. If the yes vote prevails, which I certainly hope it does, I think it's going to take a lot of the pressure off. I sometimes feel pressured when I come out to people. I'm not sure it's what they want. I'm not sure they're totally comfortable with their driver coming out as transgender. I'm not sure in all cases that I'm totally comfortable in disclosing it. I just want to be the woman I am. I just want to be accepted as the woman I am. I just want to live as the woman I am. I don't want to have to deal with, "By the way, I'm a trans woman. I'm not a cis woman." I don't want to have to explain myself. I just want to live my life.

I don't think my fears as a trans woman are different from the fears of most women. I've had men touch me inappropriately in the car. I tend to give people the benefit of the doubt, but at the same point in time, I've threatened to throw people out of the car, too, if they're out of line.

In Boston, it's been all positive pretty much, with very few exceptions. In Worcester, which I go out there and drive occasionally, more to spread the word about Question 3 than anything else, but out there, it's a more conservative area, and so the responses I get are not always overwhelmingly positive. There will be like a quietness after I talk, and I'm like, "Ops. Okay. They weren't ready for this." But still, I'll try to be polite and try to be honest and give them the message, and if they respond, fine. If they don't, at least I've delivered the message. Everybody in Massachusetts should have equal rights. It's just as easy as that.

People say, "Why do you do this?" Well, there you go. It's living your authentic life. It's being your authentic self, and there's nothing that I think a human being can do that's more fulfilling than be true to who they are.

One of the things that happened to me that I frequently relate to people, is when I went on the internet and talked about the top five things, regrets that people have on their deathbed. Number one was that they lived their life according to what other people expected, rather than how they truly felt inside, and I did not want to be the person ... Sorry, I get emotional about this, laying on your deathbed saying, "Shoulda, coulda, woulda." So I did something about it.

Jenn Stanley:

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This is my last episode of Choice/Less, but perhaps not the last episode. So stay tuned for more info on that. I've really loved making this show, and appreciate all of our storytellers, and listeners, and the whole Rewire.News community. Thanks for listening.