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Naming ceremony for transgender child an important rite of passage

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[\[Photo\]](#)



BERKELEY, Calif. - About a year ago, Jonah and Dani Gabriel's daughter came to the couple with an announcement.

The 8-year-old announced he was a boy.

"He was very definitive when he first came to us and said he was a boy," said Dani Gabriel, 40, of El Cerrito.

It was somewhat of a surprise, but not completely.

"We had always had a sense of him as a non-gender normative person. He was never one of those kids who fit into a stereotypical gender role," his mother said. "All gendered stuff was cool to (him). There was not 'I have to dress up in boys clothes or princess stuff all the time.'"

After family discussions, soul searching, and time, the 8-year-old slowly transitioned and ultimately chose a new name: Samson “Sam” Red Gabriel.

“It all started in kindergarten,” the 9-year-old Sam said of choosing his name. “I had a crush on a boy named Sam and I always loved the color red. My name is Samson Red Gabriel and I love it.”

Sam is not the only one who has an appreciation for his new name.

“The name Samson is a remarkable choice. It’s a very strong figure, a great leader...,” said Rev. Marc Handley Andrus, the bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of California, which oversees 27,000 communicants in Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, San Francisco, and San Mateo Counties, and the cities of Los Altos and parts of Palo Alto.

But even with his new name, Sam didn’t quite feel complete.

“I felt that so many churches wouldn’t accept me and this one did and I wanted to feel like everything was affirmed and I could just ignore people who were mean,” the boy said in a recent interview.”

Andrus said he and the church were as supportive as possible when the child and his family decided to have a “blessing and renaming” ceremony at All Souls Episcopal Church in Berkeley this past summer.

“People come here to the Bay Area to claim their authentic identities and the church wants to support that within itself and within society,” said Andrus.

Liz Tichenor, the associate rector at the church, said many Christians have done great harm to transgender people by being unwelcoming to them in religious settings.

“I believe they are an important part of our community and we are more whole when everybody is part of our community. Not just present, but present fully as themselves and honored as such,” she said.

As more and more children identify as transgender, experts say inclusion in religious communities could help kids with a very difficult transition, but the relationship between transgender people and religion varies widely. Religions range from condemning any gender variance to honoring transgender people as religious leaders. But children have a tougher challenge.

“Religious dominations that see sexual orientation and gender diversity as being wrong, see these as issues of adults, not child and adolescent development,” said Caitlin Ryan, the director of the Family Acceptance Program at San Francisco State University.

Ryan, whose organization works to support religiously diverse families learning to support their LGBTQ children, said the group’s work won’t be complete until transgender children are

integrated into all settings, including religious communities.

“The church is really his safe place,” Sam’s mother said. “I’m overwhelming grateful that our church was there for us. They were there for us from the beginning. It wasn’t just we did this thing this one day. Our priest was there to support us the whole way along.”

Social justice advocates see this as a positive.

“Faith and family are the two major institutions that set you on a path toward great success,” said Cedric Harmon, the executive director of Many Voices, a social justice church movement that offers a transgender renaming service. “In the absence of one, the outcomes from individuals can really be quite devastating.”

Harmon said renaming ceremonies are becoming more popular as children seek to rename themselves and parents seek to understand the child’s request.

“Names give us a way of identifying and being understood and of knowing and being known,” said Harmon. “What I’ve heard from many trans persons is the name they were given at birth often represents the assigned gender. But the name that they select, represents who they really are at the core of their being.”

As for Sam, he stays busy doing computer programming and coding, riding his bike, building a covered wagon for a school project, and being grateful, his mother said.

“When I asked Sam how he felt after the blessing he said: ‘I feel like the luckiest boy in the world.’”

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