

Holliston mom releases children's picture book featuring a female to male transgender character

By Lauren Young / Daily News Staff
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“There were a lot of great books out there, but almost all of them featured male to female characters,” said Kerri Mullen, the mother of a transgender child in elementary school. “So I decided, well, we need to fix this.”

HOLLISTON — From the moment Kerri Mullen's third child could speak, he would correct his parents when they referred to him as a girl.

Mullen remembers potty training her child, born female, with her husband at around 2 years old, using encouraging words like, “Good girl!”

“His exact words were, ‘I not a girl, I nuh boy,’” said Mullen. “He always gravitated toward boy toys, colors, clothing, he would fight dresses and after being potty trained, he refused to wear underwear.”

Around three years old, he learned to verbally tell his parents that he didn't like the girl underwear they bought him and wanted boy underwear. After getting his first pair of boy camo underwear, he never wore a diaper again, said Mullen, an adjunct biology and environmental science professor at Stonehill College in Easton.

Today, her child, now in elementary school, uses he/him/his pronouns. She asked to not include his name or age in this story to protect his identity.

While he was in preschool, a teacher noted that he always appeared to be hiding behind his hair. After they cut his hair short, the teacher said he was “a different kid,” participating more in class and making eye contact with others, said Mullen.

“So we knew that the way he portrayed himself to the world made a big difference in how comfortable he felt in his own body, even at 3 or 4 (years old),” she said.

When he was transitioning from male to female pronouns, his parents searched for children's books he could read featuring trans characters, along with his classmates and their parents to help them understand in an age-appropriate way.

“There were a lot of great books out there, but almost all of them featured male to female characters,” said Mullen. “So I decided, well, we need to fix this.”

In late May, she published her first fictional children's book, [“Eli's New Clothes.”](#) about a female doll who doesn't feel comfortable wearing a puffy pink dress and sparkly shoes.

When the main character, Chloe, leaves for school one morning, her three dolls come alive, one of them expressing that they wanted to wear more masculine clothes. The other dolls helped them find something more comfortable to wear, and learn what it means to be a true friend and to be accepting of others.

Mullen received her physical copy of the 30-page book, published by Dorrance Publishing Co., earlier this month.

When she started writing the book during a sabbatical to Colorado that her husband Sean, a Boston University biology professor, took in 2018, they joined a support group for parents with transgender children, though she said it's been harder to find those kind of support groups in Massachusetts.

However, she said teachers at her son's school have been supportive and educating themselves on what it means to be transgender. His principal even invited the state to come in and hold professional development sessions for teachers regarding gender identity and being transgender, she said.

"I think he is the youngest person to go through the Holliston district and be labeled as a transgender person," she said. The district also uses her son's nickname, which he prefers to go by.

Mullen, who has previously published several science articles and a book chapter on coral disease, said being a scientist amplifies her understanding of gender and sexuality because she can see how aspects of developmental biology could influence both.

Mullen, who also has two teenage children, said their generation is more aware of these topics, even though the subject is still avoided or misunderstood by some of their parents.

For parents wondering where to begin the conversation, Mullen suggests first picking up some children's books that can explain it on a simplistic, age-appropriate level.

"I think right now the book is very timely because there's a focus on bringing diversity discussion and literature into classrooms," she added, which includes discussing economic diversity and featuring people with disabilities.

However, she thinks some parents and teachers still feel talking about sexuality to children is too uncomfortable, though many of those same people typically don't feel discomfort talking about heterosexual couples or having crushes on the opposite gender.

"I feel like there's a place for discussions about LGBTQ+ issues at the elementary level and it doesn't have to be about sexuality per se, but there are plenty of students I know, in Holliston at least, that have two moms or two dads, or have siblings that aren't heterosexual," she said. "So I'm hoping that my book can make its way into those conversations and be a resource at an age-appropriate level."

In the last two weeks, a Holliston Girl Scout in high school has been distributing donated books about diversity to the Sam Placentino and Miller Elementary school libraries in Holliston. Mullen said she added her book to that collection.

On Saturday, Mullen will celebrate the launch of her book at Aesop's Fable in Holliston (where she works part time) starting at 10 a.m. You can pick up a book during the event for her to sign or personalize.