

Transgender women strive to create more accepting environment in Mansfield

- By Tierra Thomas, Thrive Reporter
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MANSFIELD — While the lesbian, gay and bisexual communities have come a long way toward gaining rights and being accepted in the world today, the transgender community unfortunately can not say the same. In fact, some say they're about 25 years behind their sister communities.

The subject of gender identity and gender reassignment continues to be a polarizing topic today, and many transgender people do not feel safe. Living in smaller areas can make them feel even more uncomfortable and fearful of rejection.

Sheila Matthews and Kelli Quail, two trailblazers in the Mansfield LGBT community, had different experiences coming into Mansfield as transgender women: one of welcoming surprise, and the other not so welcoming.

Matthews, 54, said she's had an overall pleasant experience since coming out in 2016, receiving a lot of support from within the transgender community and outside of it.

"I might get a look, but you know, that doesn't bother me because, as far as I know they're looking at the person behind me or next to me," she said, giggling.

Quail, 49, on the other hand, could easily point out several instances where she'd been minding her own business, only for someone to disrupt her, shame her and tell her she was "going to hell."

She vividly recalled an instance where she and her daughter were in a Bob Evans restaurant when a group of young people proceeded to make fun of her throughout the duration of their dinner.

"I had to physically restrain my daughter from getting up to go beat the crap out of them because they were being so rude," Quail said.

In the past, Quail's been fired from a job because she was transgender, but it's what led her to wanting to create a safe space and support group for transgender youth and adults. Her initiative led to the creation of Positive Progressions.

Quail has made positive steps in the past two years to educate the Mansfield community on transgender issues and make it a safer environment for the next generations to come.

"I started (Positive Progressions) just because I needed it for me, and I knew there were more of us out there. And that's how it morphed into what it is today," Quail said.

Positive Progressions started back in 2018 in Crestline (where Quail resides) but because of the meetings location being in a church, many did not feel comfortable attending. Quail went to Todd Rice, president of the Mansfield Gay Pride Association, and he offered up the space in his building for them to host meetings.

Attendees are separated into three groups: Trans Adults 18 (out of college) and Over, whom Matthews oversees, Trans Youth Group ages 12 to 18 (in high school)—run by Quail—and the Allies and Parents group, managed by Sonya Osborn.

Since starting the group two years ago, it has grown to over 100 supporters on their Facebook page and

have seen 10-20 members attend their weekly group meetings. Quail has also shed more light on the transgender community in Mansfield, even implementing the first Transgender Day of Visibility celebrated in Mansfield back in 2019.

Matthews, who recently became a board member to the Mansfield Gay Pride Association, as well as a mentor for Positive Progressions, loves getting to help other adults come to terms with their identity, as she sees a lot of herself in them.

Since the age of seven, Matthews knew she was a girl, however she always struggled with defining what that meant. In the '80s, when she started going out with friends to drag bars and meeting drag queens, it was there that she learned of the words 'transgender' and "transitioning," and the light switch went off.

Although she discovered her true identity, it was still during a period of time where LGBT people (especially transgender people) weren't nearly as accepted as they are today. Aware of that, Matthews spent 30 years of her life pretending to be a gay man. However, the inner turmoil she felt about not living as her true self led to five suicide attempts.

Matthews' family, though accepting when they thought she was a gay man, did not all agree when she came out as transgender, causing a major rift and silence from both sides for three years. Only recently have they started to accept her and her identity.

"If it wasn't for the the gay community and me pretending to be gay, I would probably not be alive today, because there was no way for me to figure out on my own in the '70s and '80s," Matthews said.

Recently, Matthews underwent gender confirmation surgery, a surgical procedure where a transgender person's physical appearance is altered to match the gender of which they identify.

The procedure was done at an OhioHealth Hospital in Columbus by urologist Christopher McClung. Quail and Matthews couldn't praise him and OhioHealth hospitals enough for their progressiveness.

"OhioHealth is making a major push to be the true transgender care leader in Ohio. They have focused on it," Quail said.

"People are doctors and you have natural healers. (McClung's) a natural born healer," Matthews added.

Today, Matthews leads a much healthier and happier life, mending past relationships and building new ones. In the past year she got engaged to a man named Shawn Barone, and she hopes to eventually have the wedding of her dreams post COVID-19.

Despite some hard situations Quail endured while in Mansfield, she's seen a positive change in the community and wants to continue to build upon that.

"You can be happy being transgender and live a good life in this area. I'm living proof of it. For all the attacks, my life is really good. I have a good job, with good friends and family," Quail said.

Rather than leave Mansfield like so many people have suggested to them in the past, Matthews and Quail choose to stay and fight for inclusiveness as well as serve as a support system for those currently struggling and without another outlet.

"I've had a lot of gay friends and lesbian friends in school who have (left)... But if we all leave, who's

going to be here for the next generation? Who's going to be here to stand and make a difference?" Quail said.

Positive Progressions takes place every Sunday at 3 p.m. Due to COVID-19, meetings are currently virtual and the link to their ZOOM meetings can be found on their [Facebook](#) page.

Matthews wants anyone struggling with their identity to keep fighting and love who they are.

"It can be a tough path, but it leads to happiness that you never knew was possible," Matthews said.