

Amy Hunter
8979 W. F Ave
Kalamazoo, MI 49009
ahunter12903@gmail.com
269.372.0095 (hm)
269.720.9329 (cell)

I am here today to urge this committee to provide lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Michiganders with the same chance to succeed that every other person in this great state already enjoys. Adding protections against discrimination in employment, housing and access to public accommodations and services is not only the right thing to do; it will continue our state's proud tradition of providing an environment where innovation, diversity and hard work are the foundations of economic and social success.

Laws often serve an overlooked function – they inform us and our fellows what kind of society we want to be. Updating the Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act to include protections for sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression will continue in that vein – it will signal employers, landlords, business owners and the public at large that we value the contributions of every Michigan resident who is willing to work hard, be responsible and contribute to Michigan's economy and social fabric.

As a transgender woman, my life had been a long, terrifying dilemma: Reveal my true self and face the prospect, as so many transgender people do, of unemployment, rejection by loved ones, homelessness and violence or, live an undistorted existence as who I really am. This conflict in me had resulted in a life-long struggle, including bouts of depression, wrecked relationships and, even an attempt to end my own life.

In 2006 it looked on the surface as if I had everything going for me. I was in a loving marriage, had three nearly grown kids in college and a great job as the Vice President of an electrical contracting firm. But, just below a thin veneer, the struggle with my identity was intense and by that summer, I knew I could no longer go on living a less than authentic existence. If I tried, I would surely descend into self-destruction again and with me, I would destroy the lives of my wife and my kids. They deserved better. The answer was clear and it was frightening. I needed to tell Cindy and my kids my truth and I needed to decide if I could stay in my job. Transition was the only solution to what had been a life-long crisis.

But, how, given the culture of a skilled trades industry, could I be my authentic self and interact on a daily basis with an all male workforce who held male traits as the measure of a person? I had already been subjected to ribbing which verged on harassment because of my small physical stature and a person who

enjoyed theatre, opera and dance – I had been called pejoratives like, “fag” and “homo” by the very men I supervised. How could I reveal my true self and expect to survive in such an environment? The answer was obvious. I couldn’t. I would face such hostility that I would be forced to leave, even if the company owner, who happened to also be my boss and friend, allowed me to transition on the job - a prospect that was doubtful at best.

I took on the task of discussing who I really was with my wife Cindy and to my great relief, she supported me, something that is unusual still for marriages when a spouse transitions. And, I left the company and the paycheck it provided my family. Doing so cost my family well over half our yearly income. Had we not been a two income household, we would have been plunged into the same poverty far too many transgender people experience when they are denied employment. Even at that, the loss of my income resulted in all of our children needing to assume large student debt to finish their college studies as Cindy and I could no longer afford to pay for their continuing education.

In the fall of 2006, I transitioned at long last to my real identity of Amy. Immediately a burden was lifted from me. I could now interact with those around me in a way that wasn’t distorted by hiding my true self and I became free to realize my full potential as a person. Unfortunately, my prospects of earning the kind of living I had before were now non-existent. The irony is that if our laws prevented discrimination against transgender people, our culture would shift enough to allow myself and others to remain in our jobs and prove that, as our real selves, we are actually more productive, do better work and make excellent co-workers, supervisors and team members.

I remain friends with my former boss. Several months after I transitioned, I asked him what his reaction would have been had I asked to transition on the job. His answer was what I suspected; with no hesitation, he replied, “I would have fired you”. As I said, I remain friends with Bob, he’s a good guy and I believe he genuinely wants to do the right thing. But our laws at the time did not inform him that the right thing would be to fight for me and change the culture of the workplace. Had my identity as a transgender woman been protected by statute, my friend and boss undoubtedly would have stood by me in 2006 and we all would be to the better for it today.

I urge the members of this committee to allow this bill to come to the house floor for a vote in present form, protecting gay, lesbian bisexual and transgender Michiganders from discrimination.

Michigan has much to gain from the contributions of all members of the LGBTQ community. Allowing the opportunity to enrich both our state and the lives on tens of thousands of our fellow Michiganders to elude us would be a grave mistake.