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The Boston Globe

Discovering, and protecting, their true selves

Antibias law sought for transgender people

By [Bella English](#)

Globe Staff / July 14, 2009

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In high school, music was Bill Zircher's thing, mostly drums. He studied electrical engineering in college. In 1994 he married a woman he met in a band. The couple had a daughter, and Zircher was thrilled to be a father.

Five years ago, Bill became Dana.

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Dana Zircher still plays the drums, is still a self-described high-tech nerd, and still a parent. She still works as a software design engineer for

Microsoft in Beverly, though she now uses the ladies' room instead of the men's.

As part of an aggressive grass-roots campaign, Zircher will testify today at a State House hearing in favor of civil rights legislation to protect transgender people. The bill, which has languished in committee for two years, would add gender identity to the antidiscrimination law that protects people based on sexual orientation, gender, and race. It would also amend the state hate crimes law to cover transgender people.

"I want people to know we're no different than anyone else," said Zircher, 44. "We have families. We have jobs. We contribute in meaningful, lasting ways, and we need protection."

Sipping a Diet Coke at her Cambridge condo on a recent morning, Zircher acknowledges that she is an exception: gainfully employed, good family ties, no violence directed against her.

"I'm a success story, but I am a minority," she said. "For most transgender folks, it really doesn't go well."

She tossed her long blond hair, supplemented by extensions. Her fingernails were painted a pale pink. She was dressed in jeans, sandals, and a blouse with bell sleeves. ("I wear a size 12 or 14; I wish I was a 10.") Her face is smooth, the result of nearly 350 hours of electrolysis. She took female hormones, hence the cleavage, and had genital reassignment surgery in Canada.

Zircher said she knows many people who have been fired after telling their bosses they intended to change genders. But her own workplace was supportive, and Zircher held a question-and-answer session for co-workers. Her birth sex, she explained, wasn't aligned with her gender identity; from an

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early age, she identified more with being a girl than a boy.

Maura FitzGerald worked with Bill and now works with Dana. Whom does she prefer? "Dana," she said promptly. "She's more comfortable with herself, and that makes people more relaxed. She's hard-working, exceptionally bright, and an exceptionally kind person." Bill, she recalls, was more of an introvert.

"I think people were in disbelief at first," said FitzGerald, a senior program manager at Microsoft. "At first, you would hear some pronoun slippages. But Bill seems like a long time ago."

Gunner Scott, executive director of the Massachusetts Transgender Political Coalition, did the opposite from Zircher, going from female to male. Scott tells stories of housing and employment discrimination against transgenders, as well as violence.

"We are a part of society," he said. "We have families, people who love and care about us. Most transgenders would tell you that they were miserable before they transitioned. They feel happier and more productive after."

But the Massachusetts Family Institute has labeled the proposed legislation "the bathroom bill" and argues it would open up single-sex bathrooms and locker rooms to "anyone who simply says they 'feel like that gender,'" according to the nonprofit's website. One commercial the group has produced shows a sketchy-looking man following a little girl into the ladies' room.

"It's basically anyone who says they feel they are of the opposite gender has the right to use the bathroom of that gender," said Kris Mineau, president of the institute. "The bottom line is we want safety, privacy and modesty for all people, regardless of what their gender issues are, and this bill does not do that."

Representative Carl Sciortino, one of the bill's leading sponsors, calls such arguments specious and misleading. "The fear of the bogeyman in the bathroom has no basis," says Sciortino, a Medford Democrat. "There is no protection for sexual assault or indecent exposure in this bill."

Thirteen states have similar laws, as do about 100 municipalities nationwide, including Boston, Cambridge, Amherst, and Northampton.

"In all of those jurisdictions, there has never been a single incident of any individual even trying to use the laws to access bathroom facilities to commit crimes," Sciortino said.

At Microsoft, Zircher shares the women's room with co-workers. "Of course, I'm fine with that," FitzGerald said.

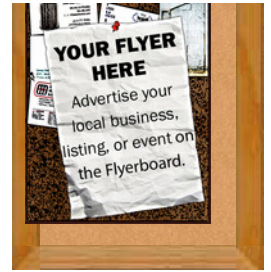
In her office down the hall, Zircher, who holds many software patents, has three computer screens and two keyboards. On the bookshelf are titles such as "Advanced Windows Debugging" and "Hunting Security Bugs." There's also: "She's Not The Man I Married" and "My Husband Betty."

It's obvious that she's proudest of the poster of her daughter dressed as a strawberry for Halloween. The girl was almost 4 years old when her father began his transition to a woman. The parents divorced, though they remain close. Laura, who has remarried and did not want her last name published, says she remained supportive during the transition.

"I always knew there was something that Bill had been struggling with that

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really wasn't identified in the marriage," said Laura, who has two more children and lives in New Hampshire. "When we discovered through therapy that this is what it was, it became clear that this was something she needed to do to feel like a complete person."

Their daughter has adjusted well, she said. "I think she's happier with a happy parent. Dana is more involved with her. She feels more complete as a person herself, and therefore she has more to give."

One of the bedrooms in Zircher's two-bedroom condominium belongs to her daughter, whom she has every other weekend. Now 10, the girl calls her former father "Maddy," a combination of Mom and Daddy. (Zircher would not allow the Globe to interview her.)

"The way we explained it to her when she was really young was, 'Daddy had a girl's brain in a boy's body,'" Zircher said. "She accepted that."

Once upon a time, Bill Kircher liked - loved - women. So does Dana, who says she is a lesbian but not seeing anyone right now. She has had a few dates but nothing serious.

Displaying a family portrait taken in 2003, before the transition, Zircher smiles and says of her former brown-haired, bespectacled self: "I wasn't a bad-looking guy, but I always felt I was a girl." ■

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