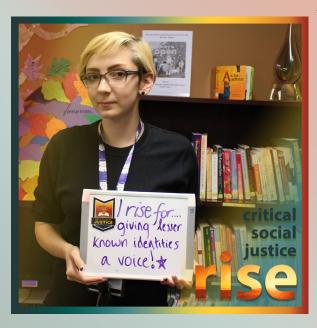
## I rise

## FOR THOSE FOR THOSE WHO CAN'T SPEAK UP ABOUT VITAL PARTS OF THEMSELVES. IN HOPE THAT ONE DAY THEY WILL BE ABLE TO.

## Reese Burke, Mosaic Ambassador

In my sophomore year of high school, I promised myself I would wait until I was in college to explore my gender identity and expression more, presuming that would be a place where I could do so more freely, back then, at my rural, red-county high school, it just wasn't worth the stress and alienation.

That promise was followed by a series of panic attacks at a gynecology appointment, an impulsive short haircut and upheaval of my wardrobe, and a denouncing of my birth name. My commitment to staying quiet lasted all of two weeks.



That's not to say that after "coming out" I followed a solid, steady path to self-realization, self-acceptance, enlightenment—whatever you prefer to call it. It's hard enough trying to define my feelings toward gender to myself some days, much less anyone else. Sometimes I go through the motions of a day in a daze, untethered to the people around me because of an inability to anchor onto a sense of identity within myself. There are still situations, namely family ones, where I choose to keep silent rather than deal with any form of confrontation, places where I have numbed myself to the sound of my birth name for the sake of self-preservation. My identity and presentation thereof is anything but solid; I suppose that's why I call myself genderfluid.

Throughout high school, I was "in" and "out" of the closet so much it was like I had left my jacket in there. If I didn't talk about my gender, it felt like I was lying, but it wasn't as if anyone acknowledged it even when I did. By the end of my senior year, being proudly genderfluid was more exhausting and frustrating than it was worthwhile.

It wasn't until the last day of classes my senior year that I felt the real impact of my being "out" in the relatively unwelcoming environment of my high school when I was approached by two non-binary identified freshmen who I had recognized from my weekly LGBT Alliance meetings. I had assumed my presidency of said group was relatively inconsequential, that I had served as an obligatory student leader who sat at the head of a circle of gay teenagers having their own unrelated conversations. The two freshmen, though, asked me for a hug and thanked me for the club and the experience they had had that school year. I was blindsided, but swelling with pride; I had never considered that my own self-acknowledgment would mean something to anyone else, or felt that strong an attachment to my non-binary identity beyond just myself.

This Critical Social Justice Week, and every day, I rise for those two freshmen and their ability to stay confident in who they are. I rise for my fifteen-year-old self, and the part of them that knew their identity wasn't something to be pushed down. I rise for those who can't speak up about vital parts of themselves, in hope that one day they will be able to.



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