

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.

