

TEEN SPIRIT

The precocious life of Sebastian Jambor

by Nadia Cannon



Sebastian Jambor puts gender fluidity ahead of gender identity

Trans teen Sebastian Jambor has a deep and dedicated passion for education, especially relating to queer youth. He volunteers at more than five nonprofit organizations, mostly in health programs.

And all at age 16. This year, while a precocious senior at Cleveland High School and living on his own, he is changing the face of youth activism.

At the age of 13, Jambor came home with a shaved head and came out to his mom, Nancy, as bi. When the two of them attended a commitment ceremony for his fifth-grade basketball coach, it helped her come to terms with her child's sexual orientation.

Coming out to his father, Tom Zell, took a little longer. When Jambor was in Canada with friends and family, he made a bet with his pals that he would do it and came out to his dad outside a candy shop called Death by Chocolate.

His older brother, Nate, is also supportive, even though he isn't sure how to react to his sibling's gender identity yet. "He has heard people call me [Sebastian] but doesn't choose to react to it," says Jambor, who doesn't seem deeply bothered about it. The two—despite some occasional spat—find plenty of other things to talk about.

Now, Jambor identifies as genderqueer and surfs the border between gender and sexuality identities. "Either pronoun is fine for me. I'm pretty fluid," says Jambor, for whom the fluidity is more important than each identity.

When asked about his favorite volunteering job, he quickly picks Cascade AIDS Project's Teen to Teen. He says the group doesn't box him into a leadership position but is just a place to have fun—while educating, of course.

But the program that Jambor calls his baby is Bridge 13, another youth-led health education program. "We really don't want to see the program go," he says about the work he and activist Tina Barfoot have been doing. His remarkable calm about the difficult world of sex education is indicative; he's good at it.

So good, in fact, that hanging out at the Sexual Minority Youth Recreation Center, a place where Jambor once thrived, has become a headache for him. He is viewed as a role model there and is in a position that "forces me to be perfect all the time. It's just too stressful," Jambor says.

Voices of Individual and Community Empowerment from the Streets, the HIV prevention art group at Outside In, a drop-in center for homeless youth, provides a more creative outlet for the work he does. "Making art in such a queer-friendly space is really fun," he notes.

He also works at Basic Rights Oregon on the Youth Advisory Committee and the Trans Advisory Group, both of which make recommendations to the nonprofit organization on their respective communities.

Cleveland High serves Jambor's needs with "great teachers and a good system—it's just the students who are lacking." Once while waiting for the bus, he was harassed by a group of kids who were confused about his trans identity; other than that, the hostility from others is limited to disapproving looks in the halls.

Nevertheless, in the classroom Jambor is bright and loves English and writing programs. His hope for Cleveland is that it eventually will change for the better.

Jambor, like many of his peers, is looking ahead toward future careers. He is determined to make an impact on the health care system by revolutionizing queer youth services. He hopes to make vast changes, and he certainly already has begun.

He also is thinking about college; San Francisco State, Reed, Howard and Wellesley are at the top of the list. In typical fashion, this white youth finds Howard's status as a historically black college all the more alluring. "It'd be really good for me to be in a racial minority for once."

Jambor lives in an apartment with his cat, Saja ("my darling," he calls her), reads and hangs out at Portland cafes. Even though most kids his age don't have their own place, he talks about it matter-of-factly: "I just get along better with my parents when we're not living together."

In some ways, Jambor's life is that of a typical youth, but his leadership and quiet confidence, changing the city step by step, are unique. He does things the right way and respects those he works with. In return, he earns respect. **JO**

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