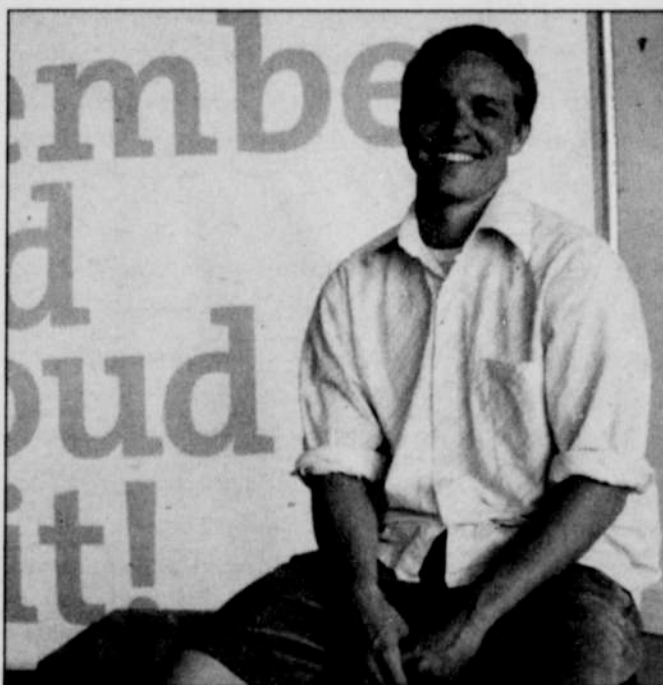


# Soon Enough

## How long should trans youth wait?

**G**rowing into my lesbian identity in San Francisco in the late '90s was, in retrospect, a fun ride. I learned about many different labels for a variety of women loving women. I also learned about gender fluidity within the queer community. A dyke is still a dyke if she's dating a dude? The dude and I have the same biology and similar presentation, but I go by "she" and he by "he"? The confusion brought me to one conclusion, which I stick to 10 years later: People are how they identify, and I am no one to judge the authenticity of anyone's experience but my own.

During the June 2 screening of *Boy I Am* at QDOC: Portland Queer Documentary Film Festival, I heard some opinions that didn't jibe with this philosophy. In the film, Judith "Jack" Halberstam, a gender and queer theorist and author, expressed concern for youth transitioning too young. He said: "It makes me very, very nervous to think about an 18-year-old, a 19-year-old going and doing something that's so permanent. And I'm really glad that as long and as hard as this struggle has been for me to obtain surgery, that I've had so much time to think about and consider anything from my choice of doctor to what kind of surgery to specifically what I want for my body...I think that young bodies that are still growing sometimes don't know what they want and who they are."

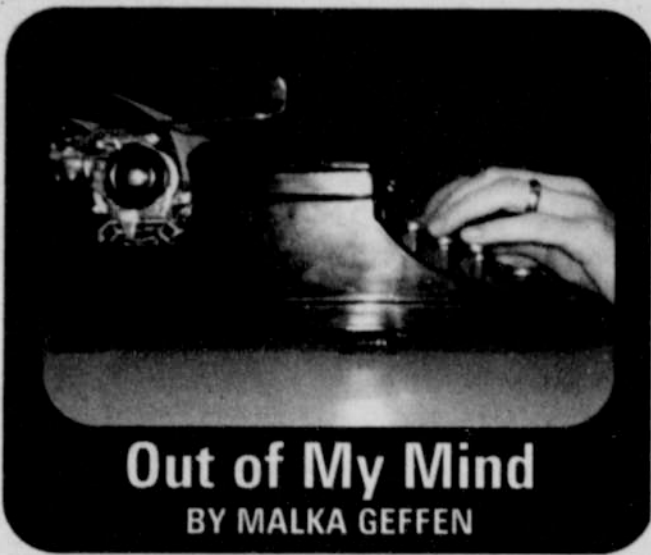


**Kaig Lightner raises public awareness about the challenges faced by gender-variant youth.**

I understand his concern but worry that such apprehension within the queer community might alienate trans youth, who desperately need support. When I learned about TransYouth Family Advocates, I grabbed the chance to speak with the new non-profit's Portland representative, Kaig Lightner, to get his opinions on the matter. Incorporated in Oregon in December 2006, TYFA has already been named the No. 1 national resource for gender-variant children and their families by *Newsweek*.

**Malka Geffen:** How does TYFA, which facilitates gender transition for children between the ages of 3 and 18, respond to concerns about kids transitioning too young?

**Kaig Lightner:** TYFA's stance on people who want to transition who are young is that it's something kids are aware of at young age. The facilitation of that gender transition is more about supporting the child, allowing them to discover what direction they want to go. If a 3-year-old comes to the parent and says, "I want to be a boy," instead of saying, "No," TYFA will give them education that this is some-



**Out of My Mind**  
BY MALKA GEFFEN

thing that happens, that the child is not damaged, and allow them to allow the child to express how they want to, to wear the clothes and play with the toys they want to.

A teen taking hormones, having surgery...it's the same mentality and philosophy—support the child. It's a dicey issue and not something TYFA makes a judgment call on. It's more about what is the child's comfort in their own bodies, making sure they have the support they need mentally and physically, and offer education and information to allow parents and the kid to feel as informed as possible, not going in blind, which is where a lot of the fear and rejection comes from.

**MG:** What is the worst-case scenario for a person who has to wait until adulthood to transition?

**KL:** It has a tremendous effect. It's basically denying a person the right to be who they really feel they are. The physical, emotional and mental effects have often been compared to [post-traumatic stress disorder] and feeling like a prisoner. You know inside something doesn't feel right, and no one is taking you seriously.

I have been lucky to have really great family support, but if I was 14 and knew what was going on and was told, "No, you can't be given hormones or have surgery" and knew it was an option, I think that would increase the mental trauma of it, like denying someone the basic rights of living.

**MG:** What does the sexual minorities community need to know about trans youth to be better allies?

**KL:** There's an assumption among the queer community that gender and sexual orientation are equated. But just because someone identifies one way does not determine their sexuality.

To be an ally, just listen to what youth have to say and take it seriously. Don't say, "You're just going through a phase" or "You don't know yourself well enough." That's true of anybody—we're not sure of ourselves all the time. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, gender is established by age 4, and if a youth is saying over and over, "I don't feel right in this body," it should be taken seriously. 10

For more information about TRANSYOUTH FAMILY ADVOCATES visit [www.imatyfa.org](http://www.imatyfa.org). Join TYFA for a presentation on children, youth and gender identity from 1 to 3 p.m. July 14 at First United Methodist Church, 1838 S.W. Jefferson St. Join Kaig Lightner for the discussion group Genderqueery from 7 to 9 p.m. every second and fourth Thursday at Q Center, 69 S.E. Taylor St.

Staff Writer MALKA GEFFEN has plenty of room in her head. Fill it by e-mailing [malka@justout.com](mailto:malka@justout.com).

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