



**Transgender Law Center**

*Making Authentic Lives Possible*

# ABOUT TRUTH

TRUTH is a national trans and gender nonconforming youth storytelling campaign that aims to build empathy, understanding, and a movement for youth and families to share their stories in their own words and in their own way in order to advance rights for transgender and gender non-conforming people. Building on past work and with seed funding from the Palette Fund, Transgender Law Center partnered with GSA Network to launch TRUTH in August 2015.

TRUTH provides guidance for youth and families considering speaking out publicly, supports and connects transgender and gender non-conforming young people who are sharing their stories, and educates media professionals on best practices for reporting on transgender and gender non-conforming youth.

# ABOUT TRANSGENDER LAW CENTER

Founded in 2002, Transgender Law Center has grown into the largest trans-specific, trans-led organization in the U.S. changing law, policy and attitudes so that all people can live safely, authentically, and free from discrimination regardless of their gender identity or expression. As a multidisciplinary national organization, Transgender Law Center advances the movement for transgender and gender non-conforming people using an integrated set of approaches, including strategic litigation, policy advocacy, educational efforts, movement building, and the creation of programs that meet the needs of transgender and gender nonconforming people and communities. <http://transgenderlawcenter.org>

# WHY STORYTELLING IS IMPORTANT

“Everyone has a story, and every story is valid and speaks its own truth. Allowing an intimate, personal narrative to be fully exposed to the world can be scary and nerve-racking, but also is an enlightening and self-empowering action. In my experience, sharing my story not only educates others, but in the process also assists in my own self-healing. Every time I tell my story, I gain more and more confidence, strength, and power over my experiences as an 18-year-old, queer, demiboy of color. I realize how sharing these stories make such a huge difference for those trying to understand, and maybe an even bigger one for those who can relate. Speaking out is the act of purposefully putting oneself in a vulnerable position in order to bring awareness to the issues our various communities face. This vulnerability and transparency of sharing our stories is what allows for new, authentic connections and growth.”

– **Tone Lee-Bias, they/them, 18, Sacramento, CA**



Storytelling is a way that we connect to other people, give them a chance to see the world through our eyes, and inspire them to action. Whether it is a bedtime story or a story told by the campfire or even a story on the news, every good story we hear makes us feel something – happy, sad, inspired, excited, generous, angry. That’s because stories that are told well move us, and that they move us to act is why they’re important.

## OPENING UP AND BEING VULNERABLE

When it comes to sharing your story as a transgender or gender-nonconforming young person, there are unique opportunities to create change, but also unique risks. The only way to truly understand something is to experience it, but the next best thing is to hear directly from youth who have spoken out.



“By telling my story I have become more confident about myself and I feel at ease to be out everywhere I go. Coming out and telling everyone about my gender identity has made me be a better person and helped me become stronger. I believe I have changed the way a lot of people look at trans youth. I go to sleep at night knowing that I’ve helped someone who’s transitioning feel inspired to keep going and helped parents feel like they aren’t going through this alone. Hopefully people are learning and becoming more accepting and look at the world with an open mind.”

**– Zoey Luna, she/her, 14, Los Angeles, CA**

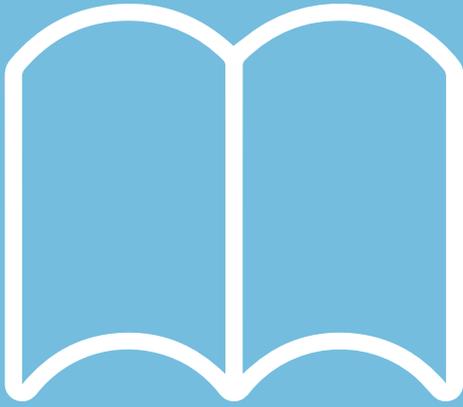
## EMPOWERED STORYTELLING: OWNING YOUR OWN STORY & STAYING TRUE TO YOURSELF

It’s important to share your story in a way that feels good to you. Stories can spread far and wide and have impacts we never imagined, and when we tell our stories we have to consider both the effect it has on us and on the people around us. Do you feel like you’re the one in control of telling your story, and that in sharing your story, you are meeting your own goals and needs?

**“It was so important for me to share my story because I knew that if I was brave and opened myself up to share who I am, I could change things for myself and others.”**

**– Ashton Lee, he/him, 18, Manteca, CA**





***“Speaking out was a way to prove to myself and my family that I could hold my own and stand firm in my convictions.”***

***– Mel Gonzales, 18,  
Sugar Land, TX***



***“I first shared my story at the request of others, testifying for a state policy. I was successful at changing minds, but I lost a lot emotionally. I was forced to be proud of my transness before I was ready, and to speak out in a room full of transphobic haters who had just spent hours calling people like me the devil. Could you imagine what it’s like to have reporters in your face and all you want to do is cry? To have to answer questions on why you should be treated like a human being? **Can you imagine, after all that, reading the policy that you helped pass and realizing it wouldn’t actually help poor trans people of color?*****

For me, being Black and Native American, storytelling is supposed to be very healing, so I struggle with seeing it just as a tool to accomplish a goal, as something done for other people. It’s how you pass down your history, how you’re raised, how you understand and connect to your family. I can’t separate the cultural and personal meaning for me from the public role, and I shouldn’t have to. ***When I share my story now, it’s for myself and my community – not for anyone else.***”

***– Zeam Porter, he/him and they/them,  
Minneapolis, MN***

# SHOULD I SHARE MY STORY?

We know that storytelling is an important tool, but even more important is the well-being of the storyteller and the other people involved in the story. Even if we feel empowered to tell our stories there may be unexpected and unwanted consequences – for us and for others. Some stories are told on a small scale to a small audience, but others – especially those told online or used in storytelling campaigns – can have a far reach.

These questions will help you and your family and friends think through sharing your story – before you go public.

START



1

## WHO WILL BE IMPACTED WHEN I TELL MY STORY?

Telling our stories can have good impacts like encouraging others to share, helping someone understand a difficult lesson, or inspiring someone to change their behavior. But impact goes both ways. If your story includes other people you should also consider how sharing will effect them.



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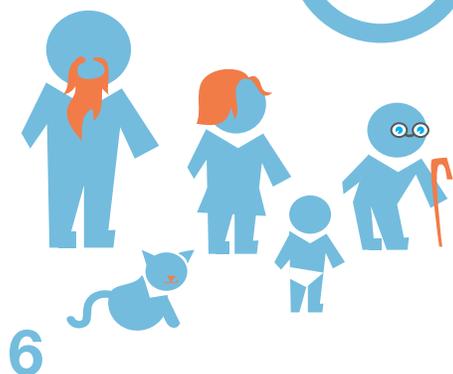
## WILL ANYONE BE OUTED?

Even if you are living your life as your authentic gender or non-gender, some people are still making that decision. Just like you wanted to be able to tell people in your own way and on your own terms, it is important that others also have that chance. If your story includes someone else's transition and you don't have explicit permission to share it, don't. You can still find a way to share your story without outing someone else.

3

## ARE MY CLOSEST FRIENDS AND FAMILY READY?

So you're ready to share your story. Great! But are your friends and family ready too? You might wonder why it matters that anybody else is ready. We rely on our friends and family for support when we're in vulnerable situations like if we have a disagreement with a sibling or a friend. Storysharing can be vulnerable and it can also prompt lots of unanticipated attention. Be sure you ramp up support from your parents or guardians and your closest friends before going public with your story.





## AM I READY FOR THE WORLD TO KNOW WHO I AM?

Most stories we share are only told to a small audience, your classroom, your school, your church or maybe just your family and closest friends. But some stories we share, especially online, can go viral. That means hundreds of thousands of people or more will have access to your story. Sometimes people will want to reach out and congratulate you or tell you how they feel about you and your story. It is important to be prepared to deal with that.



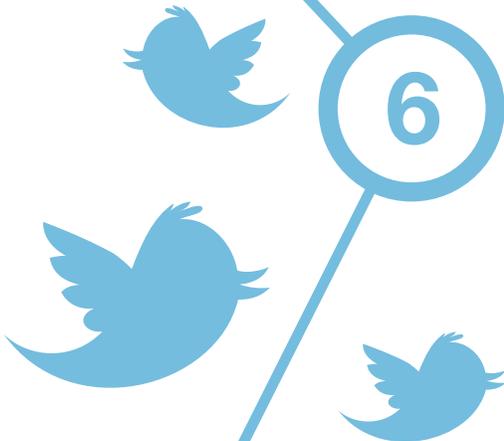
## IS IT COOL IF MY CLASSMATES KNOW MY STORY?

We all know how easily information gets around at school. If you're not prepared for your classmates or teachers to know that you are transgender or GNC, then perhaps consider waiting to go public.



## WHAT HAPPENS WHEN PEOPLE SAY MEAN THINGS ON FACEBOOK, TWITTER, AND OTHER SOCIAL MEDIA?

The reality is that not everyone will respond well to your story. Some people will say mean things on social media. They will call you names and question your decisions. This never feels good and it isn't possible to be completely prepared, but you should know when and how to respond. We will talk a little about that later.



## DO I HAVE SOMEONE TO LEAN ON? IS THERE AN ORGANIZATION NEARBY THAT CAN SUPPORT ME?

Setting up a support system before you go public is important. Whether the responses you get are good, bad, or in between, be sure to have a short list of people you can talk to and who will help you manage whatever emotions might surface. Give them a heads up that you are going to share your story before you do. They might have good advice.

Some organizations can provide support if you receive an unexpected or unwanted response. Check online for local centers or nonprofits that work with transgender and GNC youth. Find out what kind of resources they offer.

***“I had the best support system around me as I spoke out and through everything that happened as a result of that. My mom was with me for nearly every interview and press conference. I would look to her and lean on her when I wasn’t strong enough to go on or did not know how to answer a question on my own. I also had the support of organizations like the Transgender Law Center and GSA Network which was pivotal because they had knowledge and resources to help me present the information I wanted to share in a way that helped us all achieve the goal of making changes for the better”***  
– Ashton Lee, 18, Manteca, CA

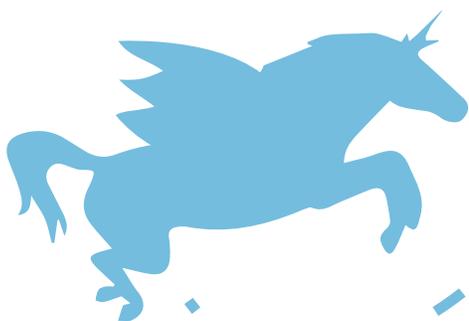
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## DO I HAVE A SAY IN WHAT, HOW, AND WHEN MY STORY IS BEING SHARED?

There are many things you have control over when sharing your story. Right from the start you can determine whether to share or not share, how much detail to go into, and on how you share it (writing, video, art, interview, etc.). Before you share, think through anything you want to keep private and how you can avoid answering questions about that. For example, some young people have had experiences with bullying or self-harm that they’re not comfortable discussing publicly – and that is ok. But once your story is out there you have less control over what people do with the information.

***“It was important for me to tell my story where I knew I would have support. I chose to tell my story at a public direct action on Valentine’s Day because we had advertised the action as ‘transwomen need revolutionary love too,’ so everyone there was supportive.”***

– Reimi, ze/hir, 14, MO



# BENEFITS AND RISKS

We've talked a lot about being prepared to deal with the benefits and risks of going public with your story, but what exactly are those benefits and risks? While it is impossible to know all of them, here is a list of possible outcomes to consider:

## BENEFITS

- ✓ Your story has the power to inspire people and engage them to take action.
- ✓ Storytelling can be cathartic. It can be healing and empowering.
- ✓ Sharing your story can help change people's behavior.
- ✓ When we share our stories we move other people to be their most authentic selves.
- ✓ Sharing your story can help people understand a new idea or concept.
- ✓ Under the right circumstances your story could help pass a piece of legislation that helps tens of thousands of people.
- ✓ You might make new friends who have similar experiences or have new opportunities open up.

## RISKS

- ✓ Sharing your story can put you in a vulnerable position to be judged and treated unfairly.
- ✓ Once your story is out there, there is no way to take it back. The Internet reaches far and wide.
- ✓ People who don't understand your gender identity might say mean things to and about you.
- ✓ If you conduct media interviews, you risk being asked tough questions that you may not be ready to answer.
- ✓ If you are not careful, when you share your story you may be inadvertently sharing confidential information about other people.
- ✓ If your story goes viral, you may receive a lot of unwanted emails, mail, phone calls, requests on social media, or interview requests.
- ✓ People at school or your place of worship might respond poorly to your story.

"The more marginalized identities you have, the more you have to prepare yourself when speaking out for the true oppression of the world. Your soul has to be very strong to not take the oppression personally and to be able to see little progress for a lot of hard work as something good." – Zeam Porter, 18, Minneapolis, MN

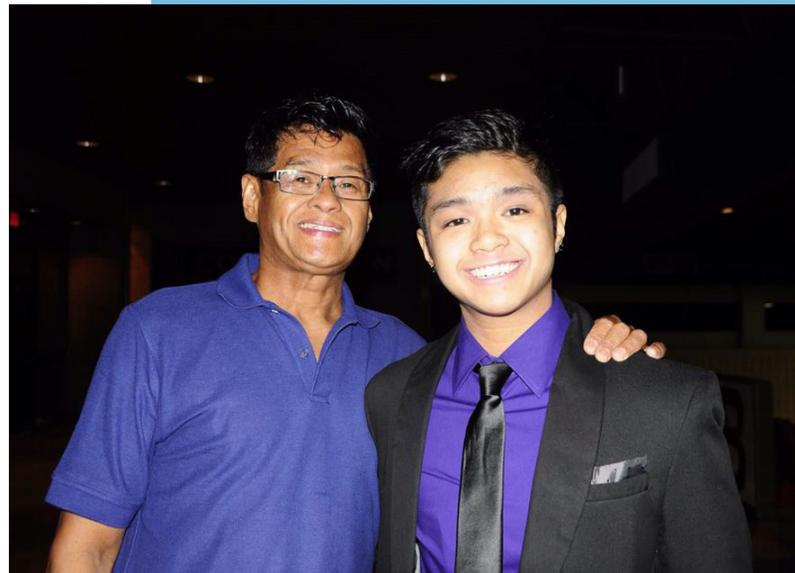
"I believe speaking out takes a lot of support and confidence. Confidence will help you to get through the many people who believe their opinion matters more. I have a lot of confidence – a little too much sometimes – but it helps me block out the people that don't need to be in my life. In media, there are people who want to express their opinions and if you don't have enough self-esteem, it can tear you apart." – Zoey Luna, 14, Los Angeles, CA

“You always want to make sure you have people looking out for you and if it’s online media, like Facebook, you could message some close people to keep an eye on your public post” – Reimi, ze/hir, 14, St. Louis, Missouri

“Don’t be afraid to speak out for the sole reason of thinking you’re the only one who feels a certain way because almost always there is someone else who understands and appreciates your words.” – Tone Lee-Bias, they/them, 18, Sacramento, CA

**“After coming out publically, so many opportunities opened up. I found that the people who don’t support me often are the ones whom I’ve never actually spoken to. Storytelling and personal connection play a critical role in eradicating ignorance, which is the source of transphobia and animosity.” – Mel Gonzales, he/him, 18, Sugar Land, TX**

“Something I wish I knew before speaking out is how exhausting it can be to always be the one who is fighting. It wore me down faster than I expected. It also caused me to lose relationships with friends and family members who couldn’t accept the fact that I was publicly fighting for what I believed in. It was one thing to accept that I am transgender on a personal level but the public attention added pressure for them.” – Ashton Lee, he/him, Manteca, CA



# HOW TO TALK ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS TO BE TRANSGENDER

No one else can tell you who you are. No matter how you define yourself, if it is true to you, then it is right. It is not your job as a transgender or gender nonconforming (TGNC) person to educate others, and you do not need to change the way you describe yourself to make others comfortable.

If you are speaking out publicly *with the goal of increasing public understanding and changing the way people think about being transgender*, though, we have found the following tips and approaches to be helpful. These approaches are not meant to be strict rules, but rather guidelines to help you build connection and understanding with people unfamiliar with transgender youth issues – if that is your goal in sharing your story.

## **Help people see past their assumptions**

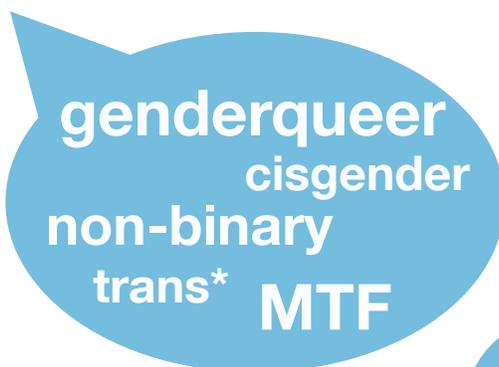
People often make a lot of incorrect assumptions about TGNC youth. Gender identity and expression are usually not discussed in school or at home, and when someone doesn't conform to gender stereotypes, people easily get confused. Often, people who are new to TGNC issues focus on body parts and medical procedures, without understanding that gender identity means so much more than that.

In sharing your story, you can help people understand transgender issues as *human* issues, not just medical or physical concerns. When talking about what it means to be TGNC, avoid discussing the details of your medical transition such as hormones and surgeries, even if you're asked about it. Talk about who you are as a person, and don't feel pressured to share your private medical information.

## **Guide people through your journey**

Language is always evolving and there are dozens, maybe even hundreds of words used to describe TGNC experiences. If you share your story publicly, there is a good chance your audience won't be familiar with many of the words and phrases the community often uses.

***What everyone can understand and connect with is emotion and experience. Instead of using shorthand or “insider” phrases, try to describe your identity in terms of your experience.***



genderqueer  
cisgender  
non-binary  
trans\*  
MTF



huh?

For example, instead of just saying “I’m a transgender boy,” you could say “I’m a transgender boy, which means everyone thought I was a girl when I was born, but I’ve always known on the inside that I’m a boy.” Or instead of saying “I’m genderqueer,” you could say “I was assigned male at birth, but being a boy never felt right to me, and neither did being a girl. I’ve always felt that I’m somewhere in between.”

These are just examples that, of course, might not accurately reflect your experience. The important thing is not the exact phrase you use, but that you describe your journey towards self-acceptance and affirmation.



### **For family and friends**

The voices of parents, family members, and friends and their journeys towards understanding can make a big difference. You, perhaps like the person listening, might not have known at first what it meant for your child to be transgender. Sharing that story and your own struggles can help bring people who are confused along with you on a journey towards supporting transgender youth. It can be helpful to acknowledge that this is complicated, and that it can be hard to make sense of everything. Focus on the values, like love of your child or friend, that get you through confusion and difficulties.

**CATHERINE LEE:** “ My journey towards understanding what it meant for my child to be trans was rough at first. I wanted it to be a phase or an act of rebellion on his part, and it took some purposeful research on my part to realize this was real for Ashton and was not going to go away. Even then, I struggled at first using the right pronouns and had to work through my feelings and confusion quickly. I got to a place of understanding because I love my child and did not want him to go through this time without my knowledge, wisdom and experiences.”

**Ofelia Barba:** “ One thing I would always tell Zoey was “you can do anything, no matter what anyone else says.” I made sure I engraved this in her head every morning when I dropped her off at school. But I also used that saying as a reminder to myself, that I could do anything for my child and no one could tell me otherwise. ”

## **Pat Cordova-Goff, 18, Azusa, CA, she/her and they/them**

“Explaining your gender to others can already be complicated, but when you’re non-binary or gender non-conforming, it can be even more difficult. As a non-binary trans person, I have learned that it’s easiest to begin with the basics and **explain that my gender does not match what I was assigned at birth. For example, I might start with a story about how I always knew I wasn’t a boy. Once that’s understood, I take it a step further and explain that while being a girl felt closer to who I am, it wasn’t 100% right either.** My gender just doesn’t quite fit the stereotypes of what it means to be male or what it means to be female.”



# CRAFTING YOUR STORY

You should tell stories with a specific goal in mind, and craft your story to reach that goal. This helps make sure that, in sharing your story, you accomplish what you want to. There are several things to consider when crafting a story for the public. Use this practice sheet to get beneath the surface and determine your goals.

**1.** What do you hope sharing your story will achieve?

**2.** Who are the people you want to reach?

**3.** If people who hear your story take away one thing, what would you want it to be?

**4.** Stories should always include a call to action. What action do you hope people will take after hearing your story?

# EFFECTIVE STORYTELLING - CRAFT YOUR STORY

Once you've answered those questions, it is time to put the pieces of your story together in a simple, short, and memorable way. Every story should have an introduction, middle, and end. It sounds simple, but in everyday conversations we often wander to other topics or give more detail than we need in order to get our point across.

In addition to an introduction, middle, and end, effective stories have six important pieces.

1. A protagonist (that's you!)
2. An activating event
3. Obstacles
4. Goal
5. Transformation
6. Call to action

## I. A protagonist

This is you! Like the character we read about in our favorite book, you are the center of this story. When crafting your story tell the audience about yourself: who you are, what you're like, what your favorite hobbies are. This helps the person hearing the story relate to you. In many cases, you and the audience probably have something in common. Remember, you don't want to give away too much personal information like your address. Keep it simple and conversational.

Here are a few prompts you can use:

- I was born ...
- I live with ...
- I'm \_\_ years old ...
- I am a transgender student ...
- My favorite sport is ...
- In my spare time I like to ...
- I have \_\_ siblings ...
- I love my job. I work at ...

NAME THREE UNIQUE THINGS ABOUT YOURSELF:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

*Ex: I'm 15, I love writing, and I'm obsessed with Manga.*

## 2. An activating event

This is the beginning of your plot; the moment you realized you were ready to live your life as your authentic gender or non-gender. It can be the time you realized you were assigned the wrong gender; the moment you knew that there wasn't a gender that embodied exactly who you are, or the moment when you decided to come out to your family and friends. This is the moment you were activated.

WHAT WAS/IS YOUR ACTIVATING EVENT?

*Ex: When did you realize or decide to live as your authentic self?*

## 3. Obstacles

Similar to the protagonists in the books we read in school, the obstacles you face on your journey are an important part of your story. They tell the reader what you overcame to get to where you are and can give insight to what kinds of experiences transgender and GNC youth face. Obstacles come in many shapes and forms and some are more ominous than others. Perhaps one or more of your family members didn't support you when you told them about your gender identity or expression. Maybe you were treated unfairly in class or you were unable to use the correct facilities at school, or maybe you were prevented from playing on the sports team of your authentic gender. Whatever the obstacle, spell it out. In many cases there are multiple obstacles. Feel free to list up to three when chronicling your story but more than that and your reader may lose interest or get confused.

WHAT OBSTACLES DID YOU FACE OR DO YOU STILL FACE?

WHAT HAS BEEN A BARRIER IN BEING ABLE TO LIVE AS YOUR AUTHENTIC SELF?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

*Ex: My school wouldn't let me use the girls' bathroom, so I had to hold it in all day. I stopped drinking water and couldn't focus in class.*

## 4. Goal

Every protagonist has a goal. In everyday life we don't always think about our experiences as goals, but when crafting your story it is important that you define your goal for your readers. Your goal can be to help your school implement a policy that makes it acceptable and safe for transgender and GNC students to use the bathroom of their choice. Or your goal can be to move through the world as your gender, free of oppression and harassment. Goals can be small or they can be huge – either way they should be realistic. An example of an unrealistic goal is to change school policies for every elementary, middle, and high school in one year.

WHAT WAS/IS YOUR GOAL?

*Ex: I want to be able to be myself at school without getting in trouble.*

## 5. Transformation

Once you've introduced yourself, told readers or listeners about your activating event, your obstacles, and what you hope the outcome would be, tell them how you got to where you are. The transformation comes after the obstacles because people who are hearing your story want to know how you overcame. Even if you are still overcoming, share some of the bright spots, the opportunities for hope and growth.

WHAT IS/WAS YOUR TRANSFORMATION POINT?

*How did you get through your obstacles and to where you are today? Ex: I talked to my principal...*

## 6. Call to action

No story is complete without a call to action. Tell people what you want them to do. Do you want them to tell other people about what they've learned, sign a petition, vote, or show up for a special event? Add a call to action at the end to make sure people know how to utilize the energy and inspiration they got from reading your story.



# ACING A MEDIA INTERVIEW

## Am I ready to handle media requests?

If you share your story as part of a storytelling campaign, there will likely be opportunities to talk to the media. If you accept these opportunities there are several things to consider, including: preparation for interviews; understanding the good and bad consequences of talking to reporters; making time to do interviews; being prepared to answer tough questions on camera or on the radio; and being prepared for any response from the public.

Once you have...

- ✓ decided that you want to share your story;
- ✓ organized your support system;
- ✓ determined your goals and call to action;
- ✓ crafted your story; and
- ✓ shared your story,

You might have an opportunity to talk to the media about it. Here are some best practices when preparing for an interview with a reporter:

## Logistics

- Make sure you are on time.
- If you feel comfortable, introduce yourself to the reporter and other staff (there may be a camera person or a sound person there to help with the interview).
- Wear something solid in color. Don't wear anything that distracts from what you're saying like giant earrings or clothes that have lots of text.
- Spit out any gum or food before the interview.
- You might get nervous but try not to fidget. Do your best to sit still, especially if it is a television interview.
- Look directly at the reporter, never at the camera.
- If you like to wear make-up, wear it but keep it simple.

**Guide the Interview:** Remember that you are the driver of the interview. The rules of normal conversation don't really apply in media interviews. You can guide it in the direction you want it to go. Lead with the key points in your story: who you are, your obstacles, your goal, and your call to action are most important.

**Personalize and be yourself:** Tell your own story in your own words. Practice beforehand to make sure you feel comfortable. Come to the interview as prepared as possible. You can bring a set of notecards with you to practice.

**Use complete sentences:** Keep in mind that reporters are looking for stuff they can quote. Incomplete sentences or one-word answers like "yeah" or "no" aren't useful. Answer with full, clear sentences. (It's ok if it feels awkward.) Try to be as succinct as possible.

**Practice what you're going to say:** Just like anything else, practicing your story will make you better at reciting it. Interviews can make you nervous so it will help if you know your story really well. Before you start doing any real interviews, role-play some with your family and friends.

**It's ok to say, "I don't know":** If you don't know the answer to a question, it's ok to say, "I don't know." It's better to do so than to give a wrong answer. You can also say "I'm not sure," or "\_\_\_\_\_ might know the answer to that," and if a reporter asks something that feels too personal, it's absolutely ok to say, "I'm sorry, that's not something I'm comfortable answering."

## PRACTICE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS:

1. When did you know?
2. If you're trans, why don't you always present as [feminine/masculine]?
3. What restroom do you use?
4. Have you been bullied?
5. How has this affected your relationship with your parents/family?
6. Where did your name come from?
7. Do you fear traveling alone/being in public as feminine/masculine?
8. Do you plan to medically transition?
9. How do you feel about \*insert famous trans person name\*?  
(for example, Caitlyn Jenner or Laverne Cox)?
10. What do you want other youth to know?

# RESOURCES

## Transgender Law Center

Media Contact: Jill Marcellus, 415.865.0176 ext. 310,  
jill@transgenderlawcenter.org  
Email: info@transgenderlawcenter.org  
Legal helpline: (415) 865-0176 x308

## GSA Network

<http://www.gsanetwork.org/>  
Tel: 415.552.4229  
Email: info@gsanetwork.org

## Gender Spectrum

<http://www.genderspectrum.org/>  
Tel: (510) 788-4412  
Email: info@genderspectrum.org

## National Center for Transgender Equality

<http://transequality.org/>  
Tel: (202) 903-0112  
Email: ncte@transequality.org

## Trevor Project

<http://www.thetrevorproject.org/>  
Trevor Lifeline (crisis intervention): 866.488.7386  
Email: info@thetrevorproject.org

## GLAAD

<http://www.glaad.org/>

**Our thanks to OutFront Minnesota, GSA Network, and all our TRUTH partners.**



**TRUTH was made possible in part thanks to generous support from the Palette Fund.**

