

**Carl Wayne Denney** graduated from Gallaudet University in 2000, where he was a dedicated intramurals participant and a past president of the Student Body Government. He has explored the continental United States, working at various state schools for the deaf as a teacher, dormitory supervisor, and public relations specialist. Denney and his wife, Tuesday, are the parents of five children, two of whom are deaf. He lives in West Virginia, where he enjoys reading, working out, and spending time with his family. Denney welcomes questions and comments about this article at [indyhawks@gmail.com](mailto:indyhawks@gmail.com).

# Advocating for a Child Who Identifies as Transgender: A Parent's Journey

*Q&A with Carl Wayne Denney*

Every day Carl Wayne Denney or his wife, Tuesday, becomes a teacher for Livia, their 13-year-old daughter. Livia is one of five children and the second deaf child of Carl and Tuesday, both of whom are also deaf. They have enrolled their daughter in schools and programs around the country, but they have not been able to find a program that can provide the support they need. It is the Denneys' desire to protect their daughter. In their search for the appropriate school, they have experienced objections to Livia's enrollment in the school and ostracism from the community and other parents. Parents have told their children not to socialize with her. Then there was the man who threatened to shoot her via an online forum following a news article detailing her daily struggles. This is because Livia is a transgender female. While the sex that she appeared to be at birth was male, she never felt male; instead, she identifies as female. Below, in a Q&A that *Odyssey* did with Denney via e-mail, he reflects on schooling his daughter academically and in life.

**ODYSSEY:** How did you feel when you realized that your daughter was transgender?

**DENNEY:** My wife was the first to realize it. She was watching "The Oprah Winfrey Show," and Oprah had a mom, the author of the book *My Princess Boy*, as a guest. The way the author described her child described our child, too—exactly. My wife decided to initiate a conversation. She asked Livia—who was living, of course, as a boy—if he liked dresses, and he said, "Mommy, I am a girl."

As for me, I am a man who is very much into athletics, fitness, competition, and the jocular culture of brotherhood and fellowship. When my child was born, I saw a son and I saw myself coaching him. He would play football, and he would be a tight end. He was going to be a basketball center. A baseball catcher. I have three other sons, and I coached them in community basketball and football. I also coached the prolific Indy Hawks, who captured three

*Photos courtesy of Carl Wayne Denney*



**Left:** Livia, age 13.

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national club championships in the mid-2000s. It is rare for a Deaf father to have a Deaf son and be in an environment in which they can be on teams together, and I had been looking forward to sharing those father-son moments.

**ODYSSEY: How did you and your wife initially respond?**

**DENNEY:** First, we tried to negotiate ... be a girl at home, be a boy at school. It didn't work. It was too complicated and, basically, what we wanted as opposed to what she wanted. We were letting society dictate us instead of what our child's heart was desiring, so we chose our child and never looked back. Now we have a daughter, and we are all in. We support her all the way.

**ODYSSEY: What happened then?**

**DENNEY:** We allowed our child to be who she wanted to be. As simple as that. My wife took Livia to the store and let her buy dresses. Our son became our daughter. The difference in behavior was night and day. She was a brand new person. My wife says she was like a butterfly coming out of her cocoon. She started talking—signing with us—constantly, and she hasn't stopped since. She is so full of life!

**ODYSSEY: Was the transition easy?**

**DENNEY:** Perhaps it was easier than the alternative—accepting a thoroughly miserable child, knowing the suicide rate is high among the LGBTQ community with those who are or were repressed. We had not been able to understand Livia's behavior. It was okay with us that our child played with dolls, but when she was a boy she was so unhappy. She hated school. She would take off her clothes in the car—and once she threw her shoes at me while I was at the wheel. I was driving down the road dodging flying shoes. She wouldn't sign to us at all. We had three sons prior to her, and I had never experienced anything like this before.

Was it a struggle at first? Yes. At first, I didn't understand. I questioned myself. I wondered if, after three healthy and rambunctious sons, I had made a mistake somewhere along the way or maybe our child was just feminine (which is perfectly fine). The struggle was not about Livia's sexuality but over why she was having those terrible temper tantrums, those angry fits. Those scared me immensely. Only later after we watched and researched into this online—where very little information was available, combined with our first-ever visit by a Child Protective Services (CPS) representative who came to investigate why our biologically male child was

going to school sometimes wearing feminine clothing—did we begin to understand. The CPS representative explained that it was burgeoning, and that many people—children, teens, and adults—were becoming more and more “themselves,” shedding societal expectations of them and simply being themselves. Livia was one of them, and the CPS representative was very supportive, leading us to further information and exposure. With that knowledge, we realized her fits of anger were all over having to wear male clothes to school. Happiness was having her wear the clothes she wanted to school. Man, I will forever cherish the memory of her beaming when she walked to the school bus wearing her dress and shoes. I was apprehensive but decided if this is what she wants, she’s got it.

**ODYSSEY:** You realized Livia was transgender when she was around 3 to 4 years old. Since then, you have moved often, and Livia has been in several different schools. Would you talk about your experience with this? Did you advocate for her?

**DENNEY:** Yes, we’ve had Livia in a hearing school and schools for the deaf. It hasn’t always been easy, but it hasn’t always been hard either. We have had a variety of experiences in different schools for the deaf. Some schools were wonderful and accommodating but we couldn’t afford the cost of living in that area. Other schools struggled to understand what she was and what we were experiencing as parents of someone very different than your normal everyday child. With time, the reception everywhere was very much more accepting. Within a three-year period, society had evolved; people everywhere were outwardly fine with the transgender image. (We do not advertise our child—this is an important thing to understand; we accept her for who she is, but we do study society at large.) Still, there were some ongoing unfortunate incidents in the community. I once had my driver’s license withheld at a local hospital where I took her for a suspected severe ankle sprain because they were suspicious as to why my son (as named under the insurance card) was wearing female clothes so they called CPS, as I mentioned earlier. Lucky for us, I had notes detailing who she was when we arrived to register, and the interpreter assigned

**Make sure your child’s rights are protected, that your child is not ostracized, that your child has the same opportunities as everyone else.**



PHOTO CREDIT: CAROLYN ROCKOW

had previously interpreted for us at academic and community events. This was an example of an isolated incident based on suspicion and fear. Needless to say, we never returned to that hospital.

When life took us to a different state, we once again explored local schools. In one school, the reception was lukewarm—not just because Livia was transgender but because we were from the “big city” and we were “outsiders.” Livia didn’t face adversity, but there was some reluctance as to her enrollment. There were some brief spots of turbulence that caused us to step up and advocate for our daughter. For example, she was recommended to be suspended for 10 days for using the girls’ restroom. We had to step up then and advocate—and the discussions were forceful; I mentioned “lawsuit” and then school officials checked with their higher-ups and finally agreed to allow her to go to whichever restroom she wanted. This is the most common-sensical solution to a very nerve-wracking issue, symbolic of a national struggle. In another school, she excelled academically and earned high honors but was continually lonely and alone. We have also experienced ongoing accommodation issues, mistrust, and a lack of fluent signers. It took an emotional toll on all of us and still does to this day. Sometimes standing up for your daughter means accepting advocacy must be done in another environment. Homeschooling seemed to be the solution. We pulled her out and put her into a homebound program via the deaf school.

**ODYSSEY:** How is the homeschooling progressing?

**DENNEY:** Her mother and I do our best. A nearby school for the deaf is in the process of hiring a teacher who will videophone/teach her four hours a week. Livia is intelligent. She keeps up with her schoolwork and is just about on grade level. She gets great language exposure at home. Still, nothing beats being part of a school with its full offerings—academics, social life, sports. I earn a good salary, but I am always exhausted due to the long commute round trip and overnight workload. Livia is also struggling with loneliness; she needs socialization. Our future is up in the air; we are looking at relocating. In the meantime, we’ve set up a small personal home business so Livia can be self-sustaining and maybe have



some funds set aside for the future surgery she will need because the job market isn't great, especially for those unique like herself. It's growing little by little as home businesses do, but Livia's helping with it and doing a heady job for someone only 13.

**ODYSSEY: Are you close as a family?**

**DENNEY:** We used to do a lot of stuff together as a family. Now, our two oldest boys (24 and 20) are on their own. Massimo (16), Livia, and Noelle (10) are still at home. Everyone signs; our deaf children are fluent in English as well as ASL, and our hearing children are fluent in ASL as well as English. Since moving to our current home state, we've gone on hikes, checked out some beautiful overlooks, and we love going to the beach. We are close-knit but everybody also has their own interests. I encourage independence. I've been everywhere and am still curious about other locales. I encourage the kids to do the same.

**ODYSSEY: How did Livia's siblings adjust to the change?**

**DENNEY:** They struggled at first. Massimo struggled because they were close in age. Noelle has always seen Livia as who she is—her sister. Everybody has long accepted her for who she is since she was 3 or 4; that's a decade now. She's a great kid, a great sister, a fun conversationalist with a wicked sense of humor (just like her dad), and a very loving and caring person. She's close to her mom, and she looks up to her.

**ODYSSEY: What is the biggest issue facing Livia right now?**

**DENNEY:** The biggest issue? It is society. I think in some areas of the country, yes, society and many individuals accept transgender people. However, there are people who still freak out when they see the word *transgender*. We don't advertise Livia's gender identity, but it always comes up in school conferences. Professionals will sign to us: "DO-DO bathroom?" The answer is always simple: Let her use her preferred restroom, which is the girls' restroom, and leave her be. Other than that, schools are the least of her problems. Today, many people are supportive. After what we've been through—accepting our daughter and then advocating for her both educationally and socially—we have been asked for advice, and we give it the best we can. Neither of us is a licensed professional in whatever field, but we have the best knowledge of our own daughter's persona, which is: Let the kid be.

**ODYSSEY: Having experienced so many different educational situations, do you think of yourselves as experienced parent advocates now? Do you have any advice that would help other parents?**

**DENNEY:** Our advocacy centers on Livia, and we give people who ask for help the same advice we gave ourselves. Make sure your child's rights are protected, that your child is not

ostracized, that your child has the same opportunities as everyone else. We don't lecture or give workshops because that's not our thing. We go for a common-sense approach and leave it at that. Don't go insane when people don't automatically accept your child—give them time to adapt and overcome set prejudices. Often, kids don't want who they are discussed or advertised; they just want to be left alone to do their thing like a normal kid ... but this means parents of children like Livia must work with the school to ensure their rights and get the education to which they are entitled.

## TIPS FOR FAMILIES ON Supporting Their Transgender Child

By Larissa Clapp

*Larissa Clapp, MA, is a counselor at the Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center's Kendall Demonstration Elementary School. She is also the co-creator, with KDES psychologist Blake Culley, of the Clerc Center's new LGBTQIA training (see p. 86 for more information).*

- **Seek support** if possible (e.g., online chat groups, informative links, organizations, other parents of transgender children, experts).
- **Familiarize yourself** with the latest laws and legal rights that impact your transgender child so you understand to what they are legally entitled.
- **Recognize** that your child has their own unique personality, mind, and journey.
- **Become comfortable** with advocating for the well-being of your family, including your transgender child, and teach your child self-advocacy skills as well.
- **Remind yourself** that positive family support can literally save the life of a transgender child.
- **Realize and embrace** the fact that there will be some challenges and difficult moments, but there will also be many beautiful milestones and memories.