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Transitions: From Danielle to Daniel, from Victim to Advocate

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Transitions: From Danielle to Daniel, from Victim to Advocate

Daniel Bryner & Starcia Ague

My name is Daniel Bryner, but it wasn't always. As a youth who was skipping school and going in and out of the juvenile court system, it was Danielle. The first time I set foot into a juvenile detention facility I was 12. I began skipping school for the same reasons that many other youth from the LGBTQI community do—namely, harassment from teachers and students, limitations on participation in sex-specific sports, clubs, groups, and activities, along with chronic depression, self-hate, and internalized homophobia. The revolving pattern of detention continued until my seventh and final incarceration at age 14. That was the year I first met Starcia Ague.

Sadly, I felt most at home when I was locked up. Looking back now as an adult it makes complete sense why I felt that way. Daniel was locked up inside of me, and by being locked up inside the juvenile facility I did not have to learn how to express myself without creating conflict with the expectations of society. In an ironic way, being imprisoned was a way that I kept my sanity and felt at peace in a relatively safe setting. Did I belong there? I thought so, and so did many others with whom I was incarcerated. But could there have been a way to keep me out?

As confirmed by the authority of the U.S. Supreme Court, children do not contemplate the long-term consequences of their actions. The direct impact of my involvement with the juvenile justice system was far more detrimental than I ever thought possible. It has been nine years since my last incarceration, yet due to my *nonviolent* juvenile criminal record, I am still unable to find stable employment. I did not expect to be denied a lease for housing due to my juvenile record, nor did I expect to be homeless for long periods on account of my juvenile record.

As with many marginalized at-risk youth, there was a way to keep me out of the juvenile court system, and that way was to keep me in the classroom, making progress in my formal education. Unfortunately, for many LGBTQI youth like myself, it is difficult to focus and perform well in the conventional classroom. LGBTQI youth have to struggle to overcome the hatred and socially imposed sense of shame that exists both inside and outside the educational system. The same can be said for the many youth who have endured traumatic adverse childhood experiences, abuse, and parental neglect.

I was very confused during periods of isolation in my life as a youth. I did not know that both my experiences with gender identity and my incarceration would lead to prolonged negative stigmatization and ongoing challenges well into adulthood. I was both transgender and trapped in the school-to-prison pipeline with little sense of hope once adulthood came. Now at age 23, I am a fully transitioned transgender man serving God and my community. I use my skills of graphic design, art, and advocacy on behalf of youth at risk, drawing public attention to the needs of the juvenile court system. The collateral consequences of juvenile records that currently exclude so many youth from employment, education, and society must be addressed, as was done in the recent ruling of the Washington State Supreme Court.

I believe we can both meet the needs of marginalized youth and ensure a safe community. To keep young people such as me in the classroom during their formative years, state laws, school district policies, and school building practices must be altered to address the needs of diverse youth, including LGBTQI youth. The juvenile and adult courts must enact holistic, assets-based solutions to the problems facing our troubled youth, giving LGBTQI youth in the juvenile justice system the opportunity to come forward from their incarceration as leaders, advocates, community activists, and even public interest lawyers to reverse the devastating effects of the school-to-prison pipeline. More actions such as this are clearly needed.

Similarly, greater access to education and the endless possibilities it can provide is needed for youth caught up in the juvenile justice system. Education is what would have kept me out of the juvenile court system.

Instead, the trajectory of my life was changed for the better when I met a *youth advocate in the making* Starcia Ague. Her faith inspired me, and her effort made to get to know me helped me find my own sources of inner strength. Knowing her before she became successful gave me an opportunity to see it was possible to achieve my own goals through planned action and a focus on developing my personal assets. It was essential for my own success to witness her transformation, to see her resilience during a time so difficult, and to experience her deep passion for education and youth advocacy.

The power of a “youth with a voice” helped me find my own voice, and made it possible for me to help others find and use their own inner strengths. If we can search outside ourselves and seek collaborative initiatives to incorporate youth voice into juvenile corrections and court processes, and into associated educational systems, I believe the outcomes would be beneficial for at risk youth and the broader society as well. Youth can only seek to reap the benefits of education if they get a true grasp of what it can do for their own life, and what it has done for others who have faced similar situations in their own formative years. People such as Starcia and me, and other system-involved youth can best tell this story. If we are not included in educational settings as co-creators, our voices can never assist in raising the voices of other marginalized youth.

When we all use our own personal success stories and resources to invest in a youth, the future will look brighter for all of us. Education can interrupt the school-to-prison pipeline through responsiveness and inclusion. It is time we were included and our contributions to the collective effort be made.