

Do you identify within the LGBTQ+ community or do you consider yourself an ally? If so, how?

Candle: I identify as a member of the LGBTQ+ community; I am a trans woman and ace. Trans woman? Because I am a woman, one who was assigned male at birth; I've transitioned. Ace? While I'm romantically attracted to women (or maybe femininity?), I have no sexual attraction. I still use terms like lesbian and wlw. I'd also call myself queer – just as an umbrella term for being in the community and experiencing the same sorts of queerphobia we all experience as an aspect of our marginalization. An ally? Yeah – to all those who are not me, as I am not free until we all are free.

The NAIA has recently ruled against trans women competing in collegiate sports, the Olympics have implemented stringent guidelines, and there is a push for organizations to update policies on trans athletes. What do you wish people knew about the misconception of trans athletes wanting to compete and the overall cultural conflicts that are targeting the trans community?

C: I believe trans people wanting to compete are wanting to do so as they otherwise cannot attain access to competition in sports. Once your secondary sex characteristics have been altered by hormone replacement therapy (HRT), you're the same as your peers (in my case, women). Really, even pre-op. So much of our body composition, even our brain, is dictated by our endocrine system (hormones). Let trans women compete with women – because **we are women**. If I compete with men, I am a woman competing with men – and folks seemed to have an issue with this when it proved useful to their queerphobic agendas... Biology is more complicated than you (possibly) learned in high school, and probably more complicated than some (entertainment) news anchor or politician is telling you. I wish people were able to push back against “common sense”, or as I prefer “the unscientific”. This is part of a larger conflict though, the need of some to govern the bodies of others, and it is sadly not new! Trans bodies have been targeted with regulatory measures since the 1690s, when Massachusetts began regulating (and this articulating) that “appropriate gendered clothing be worn” Anti-drag laws in places such as Florida are just the modern parallel to this age old practice of seeking to oppress trans persons – I was sad to learn my friend needed to leave her Doctoral program in Florida due to the drag legislation's deliberately trans-inclusive language. Let trans people exist – and let us compete.

The question of trans women competing is paralleling inside of here as well. There are polarizing opinions about whether you, and other transwomen, should be allowed to compete in intramurals. How do these comments make you feel, and what do you wish people knew to help better understand your community?

C: The parallels! Honestly, the comments make me lose faith in this community, the response to the comments gives me hope. Obviously, they're hurtful, they come from a place of ignorance, of misunderstanding, yet this is no excuse: these comments place my womanhood in question; these comments reduce me to one part of my body and not my totality; these comments are demeaning, dehumanizing, demoralizing. Yet you cannot defeat hate with hate, fire with fire. Why do these commenters think as such? What makes them speak out? What is the motivation, what creates the need; why does this happen? I think to better understand our community, you have to listen to our lived experience, devote some idle time to thinking about our problems and the people they involve, and reflecting – critically – on the whole phenomena. There is certainly a unique dynamic between the trans women here and the supermajority cisgender population, to put things lightly. Many of us have had very poor experiences, in general – and most would expect us to stay silent, demand silence of us. Clearly us speaking up is dangerous to this trend's continuance – allow us to continue speaking up. Whether macro- or micro-aggression, it's worth hearing about your trans friends' experiences with the cisterhood. Things only continue being a certain way if we don't change them – which sounds

somewhat of a useless statement, but my point is that we occasionally don't value our "lack of action" as actually "allowing another action". Empower your trans friends, turn that "lack of action" into listening and understanding, and figure out where to go from there. Things are complex! More directly related to the intramural sports discourse: my medical transition leaves me with less testosterone than some of the cisgender population (my t levels are well, well under cisgender levels; my e levels are within cisgender levels), I'm underweight (so lacking in muscle, clearly) and **6 years of HRT** has made my body – in almost all aspects, but especially the ones relevant to this debate – commensurate with that of a cisgender woman. If you're going to cite biology, make sure the science is actually on your side; I'm a woman, biologically. Why is that so hard to understand?

Why do you believe it's taken so long for the LGBTQ+ progression to be accepted by mainstream society?

C: Judith Butler, in her *Undoing Gender*, somewhat tackles this. She discusses how concepts like marriage and the normalization of heterosexual intercourse help support (or create) the State structure, and that things like homosexuality and gay marriage challenge the hegemony of these ideas, the idea that these things are "natural". For something to be normal, what is "not the norm" must be... not normal! That's certainly a motivation for progress to **not** be made – which ties into my belief. Simply, we've lacked the power to attain progress, despite the countless efforts to achieve it, because the power preventing progress was hegemonic greater). Power shapes the world – and we swim through it. Foucault, in his *History of Sexuality*, outlines that the articulation of sexuality is a means for power to define and regulate bodies; words coming *after* phenomena. You do "this", so you are "that". The pathologizing, and punishing (whether institutional or informal) of "non-normal" sexuality displays this phenomenally – which might serve as the second part to an answer... what is "not normal" is often seen as "mental illness" which leads to things like psychiatric institutionalization, social ostracization, destruction of reputation, etc. How long have we had power to effect change? How long do we keep it? I'd say only as long as we remain education on the reality, the lived experiences, of LGBTQ+ folx who have for a long time been the subjects of procedural silencing. We must create lives that are livable.

Who have you found to be an unlikely supporter of your identity within the LGBTQIA+ community?

C: Overtime, my father. I grew up as a first-generation immigrant, as the "only son", in a culture where masculinity was "taught" to me by my father. While I was heavily surrounded by this enculturating experience, my transness placed me in opposition to it; I was not "raised male" so much as I "survived masculinity". My father was not overly pleased to learn I was trans, to put this lightly: he learned I was transgender when someone shared my Tinder profile with him... awkward af. I was told I was a failure, that I was ruining my life, and, in those moments, I saw my father cry for only the second time in my life. My father was/is a MAGA republican, an entrepreneur, and everything else our society asks of immigrant men – which, surprising or not, does not include "LGBTQ+ accepting". Eventually he came around, began using my pronouns, my chosen name, and is doing his own part to educate himself – a long ways from monologues and heated arguments, at the kitchen table or in my bedroom... Most trans women are **not** accepted by their family members – I think that my father's efforts to be a supporter make him unlikely.

Is there a way in which you feel misunderstood or misidentified by others?

C: Oh my god if only a question could speak more truly to the trans experience LOL! Yes, a ton of ways. Folx here, largely, cannot comprehend a lack of sexual desire (being ace), so I haven't really

come out to anyone. Surprise? Gender wise, a lot of the problems trans women experience in the greater community (outside prison) are exasperated within prison. This is largely due to the forced/coercive social environment and our (trans people's) paradoxical hypervisibility and invisibility within social settings. This paradox alone is difficult for folx to understand... and there are more than a few paradoxical social expectations of trans femmes, equally as difficult to explain. So, do I feel misunderstood? Totally! I don't think "why I want to transition" is fully understood, and at times I don't feel "my transition" itself is understood. I "want to be" a woman because I *am* a woman. This doesn't mean I have to be into men – where does this come from? I feel misidentified with the hyper-sexualization that is thrust upon transgender women, that and folx identifying me as some sort of diva/queen. Hell, even just the assumption of sexual desire. Folx seem to rather want to engage in "arrogant perception", the usage of stereotypes and assumptions, than see me as another resident here at Coffee Creek, dealing with the same sort of political games everyone else is struggling against, the same rumor mills and games of deceptions. Oh, but you **must** believe everything everyone says about every trans person; forget talking to us, knowing us. Eyerolls.

What is one challenge you face as a member and/or ally of the LGBTQ+ community?

C: In a phrase, queerphobia. Or ignorance, more plainly speaking. People who just don't know anything – or worse, people who think they know everything – speaking with authority on our lives. "(She's this so) she's like that!" type of talk, with the parenthesis-part being the quiet/silent part. I've formed very few real connections at this facility, at least by my standards, and folx still talk with such authority about me, my life, my person, my character. It drives me wild! More insidiously are the ways this phenomenon has become subversive, as even if we, as a community, make overtly being queerphobic taboo (as example, I don't think most folx would let someone say the F slur)... people find a way to talk about it regardless. It's the "way we act", it's the "way we are", it's "how we are", it's the (sadly) creative and subversive ways people find to try and talk about anyone in the community, trying to say the quiet parts out loud. For people who are interested in educating themselves, I really do recommend reading "**Learning to make racism funny in the 'colorblind' era**" by **Raul Perez** (it's available on JSTOR, in our computer lab); take the analysis of the "new race talk" – which is in the introduction – and stretch it into an idea of a "new queer talk".. you'll have understood my point and have become a stronger antiracist in one reading! And finally – people are so touchy around the subject! You get nowhere fast – so I do hope folx try to educate themselves before we, as a community, are tasked with the impossible. The cycle repeats *ad nauseum*.

What is one positive you've experienced as a member and/or ally of the LGBTQ+ community?

C: I think getting a chance to understand and explore "who I am" is a bit of a gift, as much as the idea tends to fill folx with existential angst. Most folx don't get the experience – or deprive themselves of it. Yeah, having to understand yourself can be challenging – yet it is rewarding, as I feel most folx don't get to or just accept the labels handed to them. I think of an internet meme here, which read "Nice gender, did your mom pick it out for you?". I got to discover who I was, or at least I gave it an honest attempt. This is the positive experience I've had as an ally, as well: providing that judgment free, open minded space for folx to ask questions, to discuss things, and to help them understand themselves instead of telling them who they "are". Getting to see someone comfortable in their skin after you've provided an ear and a mouth for them is positively positive!

Is there an LGBTQ+ icon that inspires you, and if so, who?

C: Definitely not a modern answer, but the poet Sapphos, the lesbian from Lesbos. How cool to be so

known for writing lesbian poetry that you have a whole verse structure named after you (“sapphic verse”), that the word lesbian comes from the island you lived on, and that “sapphic” can also just mean “lesbian”! More modern, though not quite living, would maybe be Marsha P. Johnson, for the whole Stonewall thing, that and STAR.