More and more children are openly identifying as a gender that’s different or more complex than the sex they were born into. About 9,000 Wisconsin middle school- to high school-aged kids self-identify as transgender, nonbinary and gender expansive/nonconforming, or TNG. Some families of TNG kids — ages 4 to 15 across Dane, Jefferson and Rock counties — talk about who they are, what they need and why it matters.

THE PERSON

BY MAGGIE GINSBERG

PHOTOS BY RUTHIE HAUGE
As soon as Trish could talk, she told her parents she was a girl.

Her father, Mike Winter, is a burly, gregarious stay-at-home dad in Lake Mills, a community of 5,898 people that’s about a 20-minute drive from Madison. Winter is known as the friendliest guy in town, inviting everyone within shouting distance to his frequent cookouts and garage parties. His wife, Jen, is a pediatrician, their daughter Katie is in sixth grade, and Trish—born a boy named Patrick—is now a fifth-grader.

“Do you remember telling me you thought the nurses gave you the wrong body when you were born?” Jen asks Trish, who doesn’t—she was too young. But it was Trish, not her older sister, who first brought Barbie dolls into the household. Trish—still Patrick, then—was too anxious to use the boys’ bathroom. Wanted to be the flower girl in a family wedding. Wanted to be called beautiful instead of handsome.

“When we were playing the Meet the Parents [board game] when she was still a boy, she always wanted to be the girl,” Katie remembers. “Yeah, and Katie was so nice to let me,” Trish adds, sending a sweet smile her sister’s way. There’s a lot of love in this family. Still, they struggled. “I wasn’t as open as I thought I was,” admits Jen, who wasn’t taught anything about transgender health in medical school. She started researching issues affecting the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer/questioning community.
munity, and when Trish was 8 years old. Jen asked her if she felt like a boy or a girl. “I thought my mom would be angry and confused, so I didn’t tell her the truth,” says Trish. But when Jen introduced the word transgender and shared what she was learning, things shifted into place. On the last day of second grade, Mike showed up at school with a bag of dresses. He told Trish she never had to wear boy clothes again, if she didn’t want to. “Now I realize I have very accepting parents,” Trish says, grinning.

Trish is part of a growing segment of the population that openly identifies as transgender, nonbinary and gender expansive/nonconforming, or TNG. Studies have shown that TNG youth have unique needs and can face certain challenges: As the TNG community becomes more visible, so do the stories of children, like Trish, who feel that traditional one-size-fits-all gender definitions don’t match who they are inside.

While Mike and Jen admit they haven’t always known what to do, loving their kids is the easy part. “My thing is like, my garage door is open, come have a beer with me and we’ll talk it out. Because I was confused, too,” says Mike. “But the sad thing is, suicide is a big thing with transgender kids, and the last thing I want is for Trish to commit suicide. I thought, this is how you love your kid. You protect them. You do anything for them. What is it hurting? Nothing. And if a year from now, two years, she decides to transition back, who cares? You know? All I know is that I loved her during this time.”

Mike and Jen say they’ve found tremendous support in Lake Mills, their large Irish Catholic family, the school district, doctors, counselors and the Pediatric and Adolescent Transgender Health Clinic, or PATH, at American Family Children’s Hospital in Madison. (But like many TNG families, they pay out of pocket—a cost of $7,000 for the hormone blockers that stop Trish’s body from entering puberty as a boy.) They sent a Facebook message and private messages to local families who knew Trish as Patrick, and Trish began mendous support in Lake Mills, their large Irish Catholic family, the school district, doctors, counselors and the Pediatric and Adolescent Transgender Health Clinic, or PATH, at American Family Children’s Hospital in Madison. (But like many TNG families, they pay out of pocket—a cost of $7,000 for the hormone blockers that stop Trish’s body from entering puberty as a boy.) They sent a Facebook message and private messages to local families who knew Trish as Patrick, and Trish began

When she was a boy, she was shy like my mom. But inside she ac-
tually had someone like Dad.” The family couldn’t have asked for a more supportive response, but Trish then faced a different kind of struggle.

“Well, the first week of fifth grade was amazing,” Trish says. “But then, like, after

“I have a message for other kids,” she says. “My name is Trish Winter, I’m transgender and you aren’t alone.”
Bathrooms and Pronouns

Back when 15-year-old Ryan was still Regan, he was proud to be the only girl on the youth football team. He lives in a small Dane County town, and being on the team allowed him to buck the gender stereotypes that had bothered him all his life.

“I just thought she was going to be gay,” says his mom, Tracey — then quickly apologizes for calling Ryan “she.”

“It’s all good,” Ryan responds to his mother with a smile. It was a shock when Ryan came out as transgender at the age of 12, but he knows his mom loves and supports him. This two-year learning curve has been long, but steady. They’ve declined to use their last name for this article, but felt compelled to speak out after President Donald Trump announced his intentions to roll back Title IX protections for transgender individuals just two days before this interview.

“I don’t know if we would have done this six months ago,” says Tracey. “But now that there’s such a political climate, it’s like we have to tell our story. And then maybe the next person down the line can have a positive experience.”

Tracey refers to Ryan as “Regan,” the name she gave him at birth when she thought he was the third of three daughters. She admits that’s been a big part of her own identity — wife, nurse and mother of three girls. Every time she does it, his friends cough and correct her. The same friends helped ease his transition when he started eighth grade with a new name and pronouns. That was the toughest year of all. Word spread quickly.

“For about a year, I just didn’t look at people. I kept my head down when we went places, because I just didn’t know,” says Tracey. “And I wasn’t always that strong. I wasn’t ready for your response, or your opinion or your look. And we lost people — people we thought were friends.”

Finding a safe bathroom can still be terrifying. Ryan doesn’t like to go anywhere alone, not since some older kids yelled slurs at him as he walked to Kwik Trip. One of his most pressing concerns — and a huge source of anxiety particularly for female-to-male transgender kids — was impending puberty. That’s what prompted Ryan to come out when he did, he knew he might get his first period any day.

“I had nightmares about it for a couple months,” he admits. Luckily, Tracey is a pediatric rehab nurse. She assessed, triaged and made calls. Ryan got a therapist he loves, found the Trans-Parent Support Network and the Teens Like Us group at Briarpatch Youth Services and got into the busy PATH clinic within two months. There, he began the hormone blockers that bought time for him and his family, and the hormone treatments he began last year.

The PATH clinic has been great, but general health care can be challenging. “Bathrooms and pronouns,” Ryan shouts, and they laugh, but it’s a big deal. Because of the way medical records are designed and family spends a lot of energy corriger correcting caregivers. When Ryan needed surgery for a torn ACL, he was sent to the women’s locker room. It was awkward not only for him, but for the other patients as well.

Especially in vulnerable situations, names and pronouns are important to Ryan in a way that is sometimes difficult to articulate, often misunderstood and sometimes ridiculed. “It means you’re respecting me, that you acknowledge that I exist as a different person than I was,” he says. “It’s telling me you understand that you’re going to be open.”

All the challenges are worth it to Ryan if it means he can be himself. Tracey has learned she must parent through her fear and uncertainty, because the alternative is unthinkable. Briarpatch is a private nonprofit that supports at-risk youth and families, many of whom are experiencing homelessness, and its Teens Like Us weekly support group served 143 LGBTQ youth in 2017. By Ryan’s third visit there, one of the attendees had committed suicide. Many of those kids lack the family support Ryan has. Bottom line, Tracey’s family is intact.

“I think there’s a happiness that we’ve found, and I feel that we’ve done well,” says Tracey. “I’m much happier than I was back then.” Ryan says.

“And I feel like I know myself better.”

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LGBTQ

A collection of identities including lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual, aromantic, pansexual and polysexual. Alternate abbreviations include LGBT, LGBTQ, LGBTQIA and LGBTQIA+.

gender.org, definitions

Gender identity
One’s innermost concept of self as male, female, a blend of both or neither—how individuals perceive themselves and what they call themselves.

Cisgender
A person whose gender identity matches the sex they were assigned at birth (for example, woman and female). Often abbreviated to “cis.”

gender.org

Transgender
A term that describes gender identity, gender expression and behavior that does not conform with assigned gender norms for one’s sex at birth. dwu.wisconsin.edu/gph/health/resources.htm

Nonbinary
Nonbinary is one term people use to describe gender identities that don’t fall exclusively into one of two categories: male or female. transxquity.org

Gender expansive
An umbrella term that expands notions of gender expression and identity beyond what is perceived as the expected gender norms for one’s society or culture. pflag.org/glossary

Gender nonconforming
A term used to describe some people whose gender expression is different from conventional expectations of masculinity and femininity. The term is not a synonym for transgender or transsexual.平等.org

Self-harm
Self-harm or self-injury means hurting yourself on purpose. Self-harm isn’t the same as attempting suicide. However, it is a symptom of emotional pain that should be taken seriously. If someone is hurting themselves, they may be at an increased risk of feeling suicidal. nam.org

Hormone blockers
Hormone blockers work by temporarily blocking hormones—testosterone and estrogen—that lead to puberty-related changes in young transgender people’s bodies. This stops phenomena like periods and breast growth, or voice-descending and facial hair growth. parent.org

Terms to Know

The current state of medical care for transgender youth is not adequate. A report in the journal Pediatrics found that nearly 28 percent avoided or were unable to access necessary health care within the last year, and only 2 percent—seven individuals—have insurance that includes coverage for mental health care, puberty blockers, gender-affirming hormones and gender confirmation surgeries. Most at risk are those who live outside the care area of large health systems or communities. Even for those who can access care, it is not adequate. The American Psychological Association (APA) notes that the “primary barrier to care is the lack of health insurance.”

In addition, a study published in the Journal of Adolescent Health found that 47% of transgender youth had been the victim of at least one physical assault or sexual violence. These experiences can lead to increased rates of mental health disorders, including depression, anxiety, and suicide attempts.

Furthermore, transgender youth are at higher risk for self-harm and suicide. A study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association found that transgender youth are 10 times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers. The same study found that transgender youth are 4 times more likely to experience self-harm than their heterosexual peers.

The lack of access to care, coupled with the high rates of violence and self-harm, highlights the urgent need for better medical care for transgender youth. In order to address this issue, healthcare providers need to be knowledgeable and sensitive to the specific needs of transgender youth. This includes training in transgender health care and the ability to provide gender-affirming care.

Making a Difference

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Can’t Afford It

“Let’s just say I hate periods,” says James Malphy, a 14-year-old trans-male in Janesville. James’ insurance doesn’t cover hormones or hormones, and his divorced parents can’t afford the medical records of dollars out of pocket. So he puts up with his body’s monthly reminder that he was born a girl, which is more than just a hassle. He’s scared every time he has to quietly tear open a tampon in the stall of the boys’ bathroom at school. What if the wrong person hears and he gets beat up?

“People tell me there’s no bullying in school about this, they
“If people tell you there’s no bullying in school, they are so wrong,” says Michelle Ponder, mother of James, her 14-year-old trans-son.

OUT OF REACH: Michelle Ponder supports her son James Malphy (center) in his transition, but they are like many families whose insurance doesn’t cover hormone blockers and they can’t afford the out-of-pocket cost.

are so wrong,” says James’ mother, Michelle Ponder. “There’s still so much bullying. Kids can be very mean. Calling him by his old name. Calling him she, her.”


James first found language for his identity in his middle school GSA, but it took about a year to work up the courage to come out as transgender halfway through seventh grade. He paid a high price. He said some family members didn’t accept him, including his dad (who has since become hugely supportive). And although James says he has the unwavering loyalty of several close friends, some kids treated him terribly. He was teased, and shoved into his locker. The worst incident happened at recess, when a large group of girls surrounded him and began shoving and calling him names he won’t repeat.

“That was kind of a rough time, because I was really scared to go to class with these girls. They were scary to me because they were a lot bigger than me,” he says. “But one of them became my best friend.”

That silver lining is typical of James’ story, which contains brutal highs and lows. The School District of Janesville has been wonderfully responsive, says Ponder, acting immediately on the aforementioned incident in a way that not only held the bullying students responsible but also allowed them the opportunity to learn. It also paved the way for some of James’ closeted friends to come out. “They saw how well the school took care of people that bullied and harassed me,” he says, “and they felt a bit more safe knowing the school was there for them.”

Being a positive example for other kids means a lot to James. In eighth grade he created a slideshow presentation to help other students and teachers better understand LGBTQ kids. He has found new friends at support groups like Trans-Parents and Teens Like Us, and he has support at home. He’s so much happier in his own skin, but he’s honest about his ongoing struggles.

In eighth grade, he began self-harming, and in his freshman year he was hospitalized at Meriter Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Facility in Madison after he finally broke down and revealed to a trusted teacher that he had a suicide plan. As rough as that experience was, James says it helped. He says he’s OK, despite the ongoing stress of knowing he may never be able to afford...
they feel in their brain,” she says. “But and their body might not jibe with what about it as, people are just wired this way, thing. That’s what helps the most. “Knowing that I’m changing things. That I’m helping and making a difference out there.”

**Normal People With Normal Kids**

Families with TNG kids are facing serious challenges, but there’s a certain strength, resilience and peace that comes from living with authenticity. It’s a constant struggle for parents, teachers and health care providers to toe the line between bringing attention to the risks and celebrating the rewards. But it’s clear that when kids are allowed to be who they are—particularly the younger they are—everybody wins.

“I’ve heard this over and over, that kids totally transform when they’re allowed to transition,” says JJ, who lives in Madison and whose 6-year-old transgender daughter still goes by the name Ian. (JJ and her family declined to reveal their last name in print.) “She has become much more outgoing, confident, very happy. I used to dread getting up in the morning and getting Ian dressed; it was a fight every morning.” When they finally bought her “girl’s clothes,” the fight ended.

When Ian was a barely verbal toddler, whenever JJ and her husband called Ian a big boy, she would always correct them. By kindergarten, she was wearing dresses and letting her hair grow long. JJ worried she was pushing Ian in one direction or another—a common fear and misconception among parents of TNG kids. But as she started to learn more about the trans community, and how difficult it was for those who transitioned as older teens or even adults, she set aside her fears. “There is no cost—other than buying new clothes—in letting my daughter manifest this desire to be a girl. And if at some point she wants to transition back to being a boy? That is fine. But if she only has to transition once, which we have all the evidence to suggest this, let’s do it before she goes to school.”

JJ is a geneticist, so she soaked her initial confusion with science. “It’s been much easier for me to think about it as, people are just wired this way, and their body might not jibe with what they feel in their brain,” she says. “But

**LISTEN AND LOVE:**

Five-year-old Poppy (pictured above in her home with her mother, Lexy Spry) has made her whole family think harder about how they define gender roles.

“Play the part of the supportive parent until you can be that supportive parent,” she says. “Don’t stress your kid out with how stressful it might be for you. I did a lot of late-night Googling, a lot of texting with friends, but when I saw Poppy? I was going to say ‘she.’ And I was going to make a big deal out of saying ‘she.’”

Additional families spoke with us on condition of anonymity, such as Christina, who works for a small Dane County school district with a transgender supportive policy. She says her trans-daughter who will be 11 in February, was sad and withdrawn in kindergarten until her family helped her transition. Although one family wrote an angry letter to the school principal, Christina says her daughter would be “very miserable” right now if she hadn’t had the courage to transition, and that they saw “big gains” in her academics.

the medical treatments that could make a huge difference in his health.

After the seventh grade bullying incident, the school sent a letter to parents providing graphic details. James keeps that letter on his bedroom wall. “Like a reminder, ‘Hey, I got through this hard time, I know I can get through this next one,'” he says. That’s what helps the most.

“Knowing that I’m changing things. That I’m helping and making a difference out there.”

That has been Lexy Spry’s experience, too, with her daughter, Poppy, who will be 5 in February. They were driving home from preschool in Madison one day when Poppy, still a boy named Emrys then, piped up from the backseat.

“Mom, did you know I really am a girl?”

Spry brushed it off, explaining that girls have vaginas and boys have penises, and the subject was dropped. But a week later, Emrys said it again, and Lexy replied with the same explanation. “Well, then I’m a special girl with a penis,” said Emrys.

That’s when Lexy knew that whatever this was, it probably wasn’t going away:

So they learned, and they adapted, and Emrys chose the name Poppy in January 2018. Poppy loves makeup and Barbie, which has made the whole family think harder about how they define gender for themselves. When Poppy’s older sister decided they now wanted to be addressed as they/them/theirs, it was Poppy who was initially skeptical, insisting her sibling could only be a boy or a girl. In a way, Lexy says, she’s grateful Poppy is so clear; kids who don’t fall neatly into gender roles are at even greater risk than her daughter.

There have been some snags—Lexy’s in-laws are conservative Lutherans who accused them of inappropriate parenting akin to child abuse when they shared the news. But Poppy is thriving, and the other kids are so naturally accepting that Lexy can’t imagine how any of this could be wrong. But she gets it, and that’s her advice to other parents.

“Play the part of the supportive parent until you can be that supportive parent,” she says. “Don’t stress your kid out with how stressful it might be for you. I did a lot of late-night Googling, a lot of texting with friends, but when I saw Poppy? I was going to say ‘she.’ And I was going to make a big deal out of saying ‘she.’”

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**RESOURCES AND GROUPS**

**for Local TNG Youth and Families**

- **Trans-Parent Family Support Group**
  Trans-Parent Family Support Group is for families from all over Wisconsin who have transgender, nonbinary, or gender-expansive youth. The group meets from 6-8 p.m. on the second Monday of the month throughout the school year in Madison. This is a safe, affirming space to process all the things you are going through.
  Email Shalee Hols for information: shalee@madison.k12.wi.us

- **Teens Like Us or Briarpatch Youth Services**
  Teens Like Us or TLU provides support and education for LGBTQ youth ages 13-18. Briarpatch provides a safe space for youth with peers.
  youthfocus.org/program/youth-development/teens-like-us

- **PATH Clinic at UW Health’s American Family Children’s Hospital**
  PATH Clinic provides education, outreach, advocacy, and resources for transgender, nonbinary, and gender-expansive youth and gender nonconforming students. For more information, visit: wisc.edu/medical/tress-health/PAGES/PATH-CLINIC.aspx

- **Miami Students Matter and GSAFE**
  Miami Students Matter is a group that promotes diversity of students and GSAFE helps to create a safe school environment for LGBTQ youth. For more information, visit: gsafe.org

- **University Health Services at UW–Madison**
  University Health Services, or UHS, is the University of Wisconsin–Madison’s wellness hub. It offers an online guide outlining services for transgender and gender nonconforming students. For more information, visit: watc.wisc.edu/medical/tress-health/PAGES/SAFE-UW-CLINIC-REFERRAL-CENTER.aspx

- **GSAFE at Madison College**
  The goal of GSAFE at the Community Center is to promote equality and quality of life for LGBTQ people through community building and human services. It organizes the annual pride parade in Madison at madison.gsafe.org

- **The Center for Community Healing**
  The Center for Community Healing provides therapy for people with marginalized or misunderstood identities. It specializes in working with LGBTQ clients. Visit: arthappy@madison.com

- **Horeb Lutheran Church**
  Horeb provides support, education and outreach, advocacy and resources for LGBTQ individuals and their friends and families. Horeb is an inclusive, welcoming congregation committed to building a healthy community where all are welcomed and affirmed. Find out more at horeblutheran.org

- **PFLAG – Madison**
  Parents, families and friends of Lgbtq+, or PFLAG, at Madison provides support, education and advocacy for members of the LGBTQ community and their friends, families and allies. It offers monthly meetings and creates a “we don’t discriminate” window decal for businesses and people to display.
  pflagmadison.org

- **OutReach LGBT Community Center**
  The goal of OutReach LGBT Community Center is to promote equality and quality of life for LGBTQ people through community building and human services. It organizes the annual pride parade in Madison at madison.gsafe.org

- **Wisconsin LGBT Health Project**
  Wisconsin LGBT Health Project is a collaborative effort of health care providers across Wisconsin. It supports gay-straight alliances, trains educators and develops the leadership of LGBTQ youth. This organization has roots dating back to 1987. In 2004, GSAFE helped successfully add “gender identity/expression” to the school district of Madison’s and Middleton Cross-Plains’ respective student nondiscrimination policies. gsafe.org

- **AMMS Guidance and Policies to Support Transgender, Nonbinary and Gender-Expansive Students**
  A policy provided by Madison Metropolitan School District to help students, families and staff ensure that transgender, nonbinary and gender-expansive students thrive academically, socially and emotionally. Includes inclusive classroom practices, a names and pronoun guide and information on protective state, federal and district laws. Students may self-identify as nonbinary or gender nonconforming. For more information, visit: adv.wisc.edu/medical/tress-health/PAGES/SAFE-UW-CLINIC-REFERRAL-CENTER.aspx

- **SAFE at Edgewood College**
  SAFE is an organization at Edgewood College made up of students, faculty and staff who advocate for the well-being of Edgewood College’s LGBTQ community and allies. SAFE also partners with Personal Counseling Services to create a Peer Mentor Program. edgewood.edu/student-life/lgbtq

- **GSA at Madison College**
  The Gender & Sexuality Alliance – a group that promotes education of the LGBTQ community through campus – created a Gender & Sexuality Guide, which is a collection of diverse resources pertaining to the LGBTQ community. This includes books, DVDs, magazines, documentaries, gender identity, resources and community and wellness resources. These resources are available for Madison College students and the public.
  Madisoncollege.edu/gsa/?tab=GSAFE

“I know from the parent group I go to that there are transgender kids in every school district in Dane County,” says Christina. “Whether they feel safe or not, seeing who they are or not, they’re there. They’re listening to what people are saying, and it’s not making them feel very safe or very good.”

Mary, who also requested her real name not be used, is proud of her trans son who will be 11 in February, but she wants to protect his identity and respect his current and future privacy.

“The reality is, we worry about his safety,” says Mary. “Right now he’s comfortable being out, but there might come a time in his life where he has to be stealth. That’s the reality of the marginalization of this population of people, and that’s the reality of the federal administration that’s trying to make them obsolete.”

Mary has been astonished to learn firsthand how difficult and complex it is to change a person’s gender identity on important paperwork. Minutes must publicly announce a name change three times in a court approved newspaper (in Dane County that is the Wisconsin State Journal). Those old enough for a driver’s license need a letter from a doctor, and changing gender on a birth certificate requires proof of surgery in the state of Wisconsin. Mary feels lucky she has the resources to afford the fees and time associated with the process, the lack of which can deny access to insurance, travel, housing, voting, health care, mental health and basic safety to others. She’s also grateful her son was able to access the blockers and hormones that will allow him to enter puberty as a boy, which she hopes will spare him from the need for surgery down the road.

But not every transgender person wants or needs surgical transition. Every aspect of TNG health is highly personal, complex and private, and every family is walking a different road. What they all have in common, however, is the desire to be seen and treated as human.

“…”We’re just normal people, with normal kids,” says Mary. “They just happen to be trans.”

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“…”We’re just normal people, with normal kids,” says Mary. “They just happen to be in a different place on the gender spectrum than the way they were assigned at birth. There’s nothing abnormal about it.”

Maggie Ginsberg (she/her/hers) is a senior contributing writer for Madison Magazine. This article was made possible in part by a grant from the American Society of Journalists and Authors.

**Events in the 608**

1. **Discover great local events.**
2. **Purchase tickets.**
3. **Start your adventure!**

**MAY 18**

Oakwood Chamber Players
Concert Five
**THE OAKWOOD CENTER FOR ARTS AND EDUCATION**

**JUNE 9**

Farm to Feast Dinner
CRAVE BROTHERS CHEESE
**THE OAKWOOD CENTER FOR ARTS AND EDUCATION**

**MARCH 2**

Oakwood Chamber Players
Concert Four
**THE OAKWOOD CENTER FOR ARTS AND EDUCATION**

**MARCH 18**

Top Shelf Winter Taste
**THE EDGEBATER HOTEL**

**AmeriDown**

**Factory Outlet**

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