

Driving my trans student to Planned Parenthood

## **My queer IQ was low. I decided to show up anyway.**

by [Teri McDowell Ott](#) in the [June 1, 2022](#) issue



(Source image: Getty)

Kolby loves makeup and performing in drag. He also loves Jesus and plans to go to seminary after college.

I first met Kolby at the small liberal arts college I used to serve as chaplain. At the time, Kolby used they/them/theirs pronouns, and I tried but struggled to get this right in conversation. My eyes would flit away from Kolby's and down, heat rising in my face.

I was relieved when Kolby switched to he/him/his pronouns. He was well into his transition and wanted people to know he was a man. "I'm a dude," I'd overhear him say tersely, after being misgendered. Then he'd show up wearing pink leggings, dark lipstick, and gold glitter highlighting his cheekbones. His hair, long on top and shaved close on the sides, was sometimes lime green, sometimes hot pink. I'd smile and pretend to be cool with Kolby's appearance, while also wondering what he

would do after seminary. What congregation would welcome a dude who looked like this?

When introducing him to others, I often found myself helping the other person out, always eager to prove I wasn't one of those judgy Christians. "This is Kolby," I'd say, and then, catching the person's eye to make sure I had their attention, "*He's* a first-year student." The person's eyebrows would rise, thanking me silently for this overt cue.

Admittedly, my queer IQ was pretty low. The first time I met an out lesbian was in 1995—she and her partner were the first same-sex couple to live on our Presbyterian seminary's campus. Our community of pastors-to-be was, at the time, divided on the question of whether you could be a "practicing homosexual" and be ordained as clergy. The debates I observed were hot and righteous. I just listened, not knowing enough to participate. But I studied the Bible passages people used to condemn gay sex, eventually concluding for myself that there wasn't sufficient support for such judgment.

Still, I felt uninformed. So 22-year-old me decided what I really needed was a gay friend.

I noticed the woman I then thought of as The Lesbian outside her apartment late one afternoon, smoking a cigarette. Not wanting to miss this chance to talk, I walked up to her, smiling purposefully. "Hi! How are you?"

"Good," she said, exhaling. "You?"

"I'm great." My eyes darted from hers to my feet and then back. "Listen, I just wanted to tell you I really appreciate your presence in class—um, like, what you add to our discussions."

"Thanks," she said, raising her cigarette back to her lips. I stood firm in her smoky haze, even though I hated cigarettes.

"So I'd, uh, I'd really like to get to know you better."

She exhaled, her eyes on mine.

I moved a step closer, determined to connect. "Yeah, and, well, would you like to go get dinner sometime?"

Raising her cigarette again, her lips spread in a wry grin.

“Or, uh, coffee?”

Still grinning, she turned her head to blow smoke out the side of her mouth.

*Why isn't she answering? Why is she grinning? It's not like I'm asking her out on a date—oh.* My stomach dropped. I gasped. Then I coughed, the smoke catching in my nose and throat.

“Yeah, OK,” I mumbled, eyes on my feet again. “Maybe I'll just see you in class?”

“Yeah, I'll see you in class.” Laughter played in her voice as she nodded at me. I waved weakly before quickly turning to go.

More recently, in my college chaplain role, I learned a lot. I listened to my LGBTQ students advocate for more gender-neutral bathrooms on campus and more housing options for transgender students. Following their advice, I watched YouTube videos explaining what it means to be genderqueer, and I read *The ABC's of LGBT+*. Its ten-page glossary gave me a whole new vocabulary.

Over lunch at the dining hall, Kolby told me he'd always known he was different. By middle school he'd sought out a therapist at a queer clinic. His counselor—and the LGBTQ community he found online—helped him articulate who he knew he was. “Jesus is your friend, and so is Google,” he told me with a laugh. By the time Kolby entered college, he had the requisite letter from his therapist and his parents' approval for hormone replacement therapy.

A few weeks into his first year I checked in with Kolby, anticipating that he might feel vulnerable on campus. What I learned was disturbing. “This campus isn't built for me,” he said, after sharing that he'd developed a urinary tract infection avoiding the college's large, gendered bathrooms. Kolby knew hate and prejudice. He'd grown up in a community where kids would wear Confederate uniforms to school on Halloween. I'd hoped he would feel safe and welcome on our campus. Instead, I learned that kindness and understanding continued to be the exception in Kolby's life, not the norm.

After a trans woman was invited to speak to the first-year students, Kolby overheard a group of his peers mocking the speaker and wondering about her genitals. In his psychology class, a student asked how it could be ethical to give trans people

hormones if their brains are aligned with their anatomical sex. And our college data system kept spitting out Kolby's old, female name, which led to him constantly being outed in programs printed, rosters called, and emails sent. It grieved me to learn all this.

As we sat and talked, Kolby said he was ready to get hormone replacement therapy. But the cheapest and safest HRT source was a Planned Parenthood clinic two and a half hours away. He wasn't sure when he could get an appointment, and he was worried about missing classes.

I'd never been to Planned Parenthood. I pictured Kolby running a gauntlet of screaming protesters waving pictures of bloody fetuses, and I found myself making an offer.

"Hey, would you like someone to go with you?"

"Um, yeah!" Kolby said, his eyes wide with delight.

It felt good to be wanted. "OK. Let me know when, and I'll work out my schedule so I can go."

"Are you sure? I know you're really busy. And it's pretty far. I don't feel like I should ask you to do that."

"No, I want to." And I did. But I also worried about screwing up—saying or doing something stupid, embarrassing Kolby rather than being helpful. "Just let me know when you get the appointment."

A few weeks later I picked Kolby up at 8 a.m. On the drive, he explained that today was just blood work; he'd have to go back in a few months for his prescription. Once he started HRT, it would be like going through puberty again. His skin would get oily and possibly break out. His voice would deepen, and he'd experience growing pains because, "you know, parts are moving around."

Actually, I didn't know, but I felt I shouldn't probe further. HRT sounded terrible, yet Kolby couldn't have been more excited. He'd been waiting for this treatment for years. "We can't be late," he'd insisted. "Planned Parenthood is really strict about appointment times."

We pulled into town before the clinic even opened and drove to the nearest Starbucks to wait. I used the women's restroom there. It had been a long drive, but Kolby was waiting to use the restroom at Planned Parenthood. He constantly feared being harassed or assaulted.

It was a perfect fall day, so we sat together outside with our coffee. But Kolby was too distracted to engage in conversation. His eyes were darting from me to the people around us to the ground. His knee bounced.

We arrived at the clinic just before it opened. I was surprised by its discreet location, tucked into the corner of a rundown strip mall. The only other people waiting were a young mother with her tiny infant. At 11, a woman in scrubs unlocked the door, and we all filed in. I settled into the waiting room with my book. The woman who registered Kolby greeted him warmly and patiently talked him through the forms he needed to fill out. A rainbow sign on the door to the treatment area identified the clinic as a safe place. The bathrooms were labeled as gender-neutral.

An hour later, Kolby texted from his exam room. "The social worker said I might get my prescription today!!!"

"Yay!!" I texted back.

Back in the car, Kolby was elated, not just because he'd gotten the prescription right away but because his experience had been so positive.

"The nurses were great," he said. Kolby has a beautiful smile, wide and infectious. "One of them said, 'Oh, I can tell, you're going to be one of the cute ones.'"

We both laughed with joy over this compliment.

"Oh, Kolby. You are! You're definitely going to be one of the cute ones," I responded, recognizing how much I'd wanted this for him—this place where he was accepted and safe, this experience that made him smile.

*A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Being my trans student's driver."*