

My name is Melissa Sklarz.

I am a transsexual woman.

I am a transgender New Yorker.

I wish to thank both the Senator and the Assemblymember for making this event possible.

Transgender is simply moving from a birth gender identity towards the other gender.

My journey was neither simple or easy. It did not happen overnight and I took action only after years of self destructive behavior and intense denial.

I always thought I would outgrow my gender identity discomfort. I was aware that I felt differently as a child and fought hard to hide it. There was no community when I was a kid nor few words to describe the process and feelings.

As a young guy, I did my best to fit in but could never escape the inner struggle. Finally, in my late 30s and confronted with serious substance abuse issues, I was forced to honestly evaluate my feelings in the light of day. I went to the Gender Identity Project at the LGBT Community Center on W. 13th st., and started to contemplate a change of life, in concert with others who felt as i did. I was not alone.

When I started on female hormones, to change my body, I was at my job for 8 years, so I felt safe to discuss this journey with two close work friends. Nevertheless, within one month, I was fired. I never thought that I would not be able to find full time employment again for 2 1/2 years and that it would take over 10 years for my income to reach the point at which i was fired. Mostly, i did market research on the phone, temporary office help, and as a cocktail waitress. I had moved to W14th st, near the transgender sex area in the Meat Market, so I would feel safer. Finally, I was hired first by Gay Games, then GMHC, and then the Credit Union where I still work today.

I was among the activists who brought transgender civil rights to New York, first through the Giuliani years, and was with Mayor Bloomberg when he signed our civil rights bill in May 2002.

Having legal civil rights protection as a transgender New Yorker has made a huge change in my life. I have been promoted at work twice as an out transsexual woman, and have purchased a home in Queens, in front of the co-op board. I have employment protection, housing protection, and quality health care, as a result of my position at work.

GENDA would add those same protections that I enjoy in New York City and create the same level field of opportunity throughout New York State. It is not extra protection but makes being a transgender New Yorker as safe as any other person in our state. I do not ask anyone in this room to make my choices. I will do that on my own, but i do ask that arbitrary barriers be removed so that this profound journey need not carry extra risks that put me in danger.

GENDA will affect very few in this room but will help so many of people like me in the struggle to sort out gender identity and gender expression. It will affect all of us, regardless of race, age, culture or class, whether we live in the big cities or out in the countryside.

Our bill is now 10 years old and I ask the Senate to join with the Assembly and our Governor to allow the bill to the floor and let the Senate vote their conscience, that is to allow all New Yorkers to share in the pursuit of basic civil rights.