

The United States Declaration of Independence states that certain unalienable rights have been given to all humans by their Creator, and which governments are created to protect. Among these are Life, Liberty and **the Pursuit of Happiness.**

A Portrait of Courage

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An Open Letter to the Parents and Alumni of St. John's School

By Sara Caplan, Head Prefect Class of 2011

As y'all may or may not be aware, the State of Texas has been waging an intense war against trans Texans. From the over 90 bills targeting trans people currently making their way through the Texas Legislature to Greg Abbott's attempts to criminalize parents of trans children who try to help their kids access medical care to AG Ken Paxton trying to create registers of trans adults, this is a fact that can no longer be ignored.

This is also happening in state legislatures around the country as well as in the House of Representatives.

I am not an outsider coming in to scold you about a theoretical problem. Trans people aren't an abstract political talking point. I am a part of your community. I am your classmate, your friend, your neighbor.

My name is Sara Caplan, and I graduated from St. John's in 2011. While I was in high school, I was the captain of the swim team, president of the Latin club, and Head Prefect. I am also a trans woman, though I didn't know that until after I left St. John's. I graduated high school not even knowing trans people existed. We didn't learn about trans people in our skills classes or our sex ed assemblies. We didn't discuss queer authors in our English classes. We didn't learn about the history of gay or trans communities in our history classes. Even though I was supposedly receiving the best high school education a parent could buy, I was never taught any context for understanding myself.

I appeared to be the model St. John's boy. I was a leader. I was an athlete. I got good grades. I had friends. I went to Harvard. You could not have been more SJS Not-Without-Honor Prestigious Scholar Athlete than I was. And throughout it all, I was miserable. I struggled with recurring bouts of depression that I didn't have the tools to understand. I felt isolated and lonely much of the time and I just couldn't understand why.

I never got to the point of actively attempting or desiring suicide, but I did often daydream about simply fading away. I was everything I was told to be — smart, strong, successful — and yet I was suffering. I became convinced that I might never be happy.

In retrospect, much of what I was struggling through was the unprocessed pain of being a trans teenager who wasn't provided the tools or space to understand myself.

That's what too many people don't seem to understand. Yes, there is a much higher incidence of depression, anxiety, and suicidality amongst trans youths and trans adults. Yes, as a parent, it is scary to think that your kid might be part of a demographic associated with such statistics. But the fact of the matter is that a trans kid will be a trans kid whether they learn about it in school or not. It's not learning about trans people that turns kids trans. It's not learning about themselves that makes trans kids sad.

What causes the pain and suffering is lacking the tools to understand yourself. Not having a community that supports you. Feeling othered. Feeling isolated. Worrying that, if you drop the mask and dare to be yourself, people will hate you or want to hurt you.

If you really care about kids, launching a legal war against some of the most vulnerable children, empowering courts to rip apart their families, and threatening to put their parents in jail is the exact opposite of what you need to be doing. Kids need support, love, understanding, respect, and the chance to explore and learn about themselves. They do NOT need to be a scapegoat in a sociopathic and cynical culture war meant to let populist politicians ride into office on waves of distracting hatred. Please, just for a second, consider what y'all are letting happen!

Many of you in the St. John's community likely voted for and donated to the politicians waging this crusade. You are the parents and alumni of one of the most elite schools in the entire country. Any given graduating class represents millions or even billions of family assets. I know that in my graduating class of ~130 kids, we had billionaire heirs and scions to vast oil and gas fortunes. The St. John's community represents a massive network of financial and systemic influence.

That also means that the current political situation was almost certainly caused by many members of the SJS community, and that even more of you allowed it to happen by passively standing by. Our state, which supposedly loves Freedom and Independence, is waging a direct war against some of its most vulnerable citizens, including children, and many of you are to blame. If that sounds harsh, it's meant to.

And to be clear, I'm not just talking to Republicans. This very much includes those of you who consider yourselves liberal or who may even post a rainbow flag on your Instagram during Pride Month. Y'all are all part of the same influential community. If you aren't doing what you can to stand against the current attacks, if you aren't using your position to critique those in power or those funding them, even if they are your friends, then you are part of the problem.

I live in California now, but I am a Texan. I am a third generation Houstonian on my dad's side and a seventh generation Texan on my mom's. My mom's family immigrated to Texas in 1853, just 17 years after the Battle of the Alamo. My parents were living on the island of Saipan when my mom got pregnant, and they moved back to Texas just to make sure I was born there. That's how much being a Texan meant to my family. But now, I no longer feel safe returning to my home state.

Even though, unlike most trans people, I am lucky enough to still be close with my loving, supportive parents and brothers (SJS '07 & '14), it's gotten to the point where I am afraid to go back to Houston to see them. I'm afraid I'll end up on Ken Paxton's registry. I'm afraid that the extreme rhetoric of the American Right will inspire someone to beat me up if they see me walking out of the Kolache Factory or Goode Company. I'm afraid that I will be arrested for going out to eat with my family and wind up in a men's prison, even though all my legal ID's have listed me as female for years now.

I would love to go back to Houston to speak to the students and parents of St. John's about my experiences as a trans person and about the history of trans people in the United States because I know there are many gay and trans kids and parents of gay and trans kids in our community who are suffering right now. I would love to be able to assure them that they aren't alone, that they are loved, and that everything will be ok. But I don't feel safe doing that.

If I'm this scared from the relative safety of California, think about the trans people still living in your communities. Think about the trans kids who aren't old enough to leave home. Think about the families who are having to uproot their entire lives just for the crime of loving and supporting their children.

I promise you that you do know trans kids, whether or not they have felt safe enough to come out. If you're an alum, you had trans classmates. If you are a parent, your kids have trans classmates. Some of you reading this probably have trans kids yourselves, whether you know it yet or not. I promise you, these kids are suffering. They need your help.

Do something. Please.

Love,

Sara Caplan

St. John's School, Class of 2011

What you can do:

Call your state and national representatives and let them know you will not stand for attacks on your trans neighbors

Speak out when you hear people spreading hate, even if it feels awkward to do so

Publicly share your support for trans people

Donate to those doing the work on the frontlines

Where you can donate:

<https://www.equalitytexas.org>

<https://www.transtexas.org>

<https://montrosecenter.org/donate/>

<https://www.pflaghouston.org>

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