NON-BINARY IN THE SOUTH

RENAE TAYLOR

Gender isn’t as black and white as people think; there are gray areas within gender. There are (and always have been) many people who have existed outside of the strict categories of male or female. Different cultures from all over the world have embraced more than two genders. [See the box below.] I never felt fully male or female, but a blending of the masculine and feminine in one vessel. I am non-binary in a culture that sees everyone as being one of two sexes – male and female.

I spend a lot of my time trying to inform people about what it means to be non-binary. I get mis-gendered a lot when I’m out in the community. My pronouns reflect my gender identity. I ask people to use “They, Them, and Their” when they refer to me. Being non-binary is a valid gender identity. More and more people are coming out as feeling non-binary. We have a right to express ourselves as we see fit. People might not understand these feelings, because they are cisgender. It’s okay not to understand. Understanding is not a prerequisite for accepting someone as they say they are.

I used to think of myself as a “gender bender” or androgynous. I didn’t even know the different terms to describe what I was feeling. When I was a child, people often thought I was female. In my early teens, I started to cross-dress. I’m originally from a small town in Mississippi. My life was very problematic. Children teased me for not being masculine. I left high school in eleventh grade and moved away from home. I lived with my favorite aunt, who was more accepting, and she encouraged me to be who I am.

Here in Memphis, which is the buckle of the Bible belt, it is hard existing outside of the gender binary. People judge you by your presentation. I love graphic tee shirts and girl jeans; that is my aesthetic. Some days being me is easy, and some days it is disheartening. There are days where I can’t get my groceries bagged. Once you identify as trans or non-binary, some people want to see you in a dress and with a femme hairstyle. People often ask me why I don’t wear dresses. I’m sometimes uncomfortable wearing dresses in public. It’s not that I’m embarrassed; it’s about the negative attention I may get. I don’t always have access to a vehicle and public transportation is a no-no for me.

I have some family who support me, and I have some family who still call me by my birth name. I ignore it because it doesn’t truly affect my happiness with who I am. Sometimes, I believe not communicating with relatives that don’t get me is important for my personal sanity. It’s better for me to be in a community of like-minded people. They help me stay grounded and help me continue with the work being done. Every now and then, I’m surprised by someone telling me I make a difference in their life or they appreciate me for what I do in our community. Getting positive affirmation helps me know I’m doing the right thing.

Renae Taylor is a 41-year-old non-binary trans person of color living in Memphis. They are an activist, advocate, HIV educator, author and speaker. They give a voice to the voiceless, and they are seeking equality and social equity for all.

LEARN THESE WORDS

**GENDER:** the social roles, behaviors, and activities that define men and women.

**SEX:** the biological characteristics that define men and women.

**BINARY:** a system that involves two things (such as men and women). Non-binary is a system with more than two things (such as men, women, intersex people, etc.). A non-binary person is someone who doesn’t identify as one sex or another.

**INTERSEX:** when a person has both male and female biological characteristics. About 1.7% of the population is intersex.

**TRANSGENDER:** someone whose gender identity does not correspond with the gender they were assigned at birth.

**CISGENDER:** this term describes people who identify with the gender they were given at birth.

For more resources visit: http://www.transstudent.org