

Stephanie Mott Uses Education to Fight Inequality

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PITTSBURG —Stephanie Mott, Topeka, probably won't tune in to "Dancing With the Stars" to watch Chaz Bono compete, but that's not because she's disgusted or horrified by Bono, the former daughter of Cher and Sonny Bono, who now identifies himself as a transsexual man.

Instead, Mott said, she is simply too busy with her day job, her duties as executive director of the Kansas Statewide Transgender Education Project, her work as state vice chair for the Kansas Equality Coalition, her studies toward a bachelor of science in social work at Washburn University, her volunteer work with the Topeka/Shawnee County Homeless Taskforce and her involvement with her church.

Mott hosted a transsexual education forum Sunday at the Pittsburg Public Library. She hopes to help people develop a better understanding of what it's like to be transgender, and the issues transgenders often face. Many, for example, become victims of violence.

"Once a month in the United States, and once a day in some places in the world, a transgender person is murdered just for who they are," Mott said. "Forty-one percent of transgender people attempt suicide. Nineteen percent are denied basic medical care."

She believes that educational programs are an important weapon in the battle against hate.

"If you just have political action, you don't change any hearts," Mott said. "This forum in Pittsburg is my 69th presentation in Kansas since August, 2010, and it's exciting we've been able to do so many presentations in such a short time."

She shared her own story of being born as Steven Mott and growing up on a small farm outside Eudora.

"My mother is the basis for everything I know about unconditional love," Mott said. "My father was a good provider. It was a happy home."

But she was unable to be happy in it because of who she was.

"The first thing I knew about myself was that I was a little girl born in a little boy's body," Mott said. "The second thing I knew was that I could not be myself in the light of day. Every moment of my existence was spent in the battle between who I am vs. who I was supposed to be."

At 17, Mott started going to business courses at the University of Kansas.

"Every day seemed to be a little bit harder to deal with, and then a year later I discovered alcohol," Mott said. "It changed the way I felt. I abused alcohol and drugs for the next 30 years."

Steven Mott also married twice during that time. Both marriages ended in divorce.

"In the second divorce, children were involved, not mine," Mott said. "I decided that I couldn't do this any more because people were being hurt, people's lives were being harmed by this effort of mine to behave like a man."

Her life, she said, became pretty horrible.

"I couldn't take care of myself, or my place, even of my pets the way I wanted to," Mott said. "I'm ashamed of that part of my life, but I know that I was very sick. In November of 2005, the company I worked for in Lawrence went out of business, and I became homeless. I called my sisters and asked if I could stay with them. They said no, they were tired of watching me try to kill myself and they didn't want me around their teenagers." Finally, Mott ended up in the Topeka Rescue Mission.

"I hadn't been there more than a few days when they asked people if they wanted to come up and give themselves to Jesus, and I did," Mott said. "I started attending a Southern Baptist church near the mission, got into an alcohol treatment program and saw a therapist about my gender identity. A friend invited me to the Metropolitan Christian Church in Topeka and said there were some transgender people there. I couldn't believe that there would be transgender people at a church."

In 2006 she went to MCC and met a transsexual woman.

"She looked just like a girl, and I couldn't believe she hadn't been born a girl," Mott said. "When I met her, I knew for the first time that it was all right for me to be a woman. I went back the next Sunday as Steve, and the Sunday after that, I went to MCC as Stephanie. A friend took me to a thrift shop and bought me a dress, shoes and just the right earrings and I got dressed in the women's restroom while someone stood guard at the door. Then I went upstairs to church."

When the attendance book was passed around, she signed the name 'Stephanie Mott' for the very first time. Mott has been living full-time as Stephanie for over four years now, and in November will celebrate six years of sobriety. Her parents and two brothers are deceased, but her relationship with her two sisters has improved.

"They had known their brother Steve for 48 years, and they needed to mourn him," Mott said. "We need to be sensitive to how our transition impacts the family of people who care about us."

The furor over Chaz Bono dancing on TV is just an example of the feelings many still have about transsexual persons, but Mott believes it may, in the long run, help her cause.

"When you victimize us, you humanize us," she said. "There is nothing inherent about being transgender that makes me want to harm anyone, or not be a good employee or a good renter. All we want is the same opportunities in life everybody else has. Every time I identify as a transgender woman in public, I increase my chances of meeting violence, but I also reduce the chance of somebody else meeting violence."

Anyone wishing additional information may send an email to info@k-step.org or call 785-215-7436.

Patrick, Nikki. "KU Increases Autism Research." Morning Sun, 3 Sep. 2011. Web. 12 June 2013.

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