Daniel Blevins

Oneida, Tenn.

Salon owner/hairstylist and founder of Stand In Pride

"I started Stand In Pride, (an organization made up of 'Stand In Family Members' for LGBTQ+ community members who have lost the support of their loved ones), because I grew up in this small town with no representation. I didn't know a single gay person until I was in my mid-twenties. Stand In Pride began from a private Facebook group that allowed people to connect in a safe space. I started with people who wanted to stand in at weddings, but it quickly evolved and became about support and emotional connection. Now, it's gone global. We have members in more than 70 countries. Four years ago, when my husband and I got married after being together for 23 years, our photographer shared our wedding photos on his Facebook page. That was the beginning of representation for this small community.

One of the biggest reasons my husband and I got married was for the legal protection marriage offers. We're getting older. If one of us is terminal or whatever, we want to make sure the other one can make decisions for us. If marriage equality changes on the state level, that's going to be a huge issue. If your partner can't make healthcare decisions, you have nobody. If a 20-year-old gay man has been disowned by his family and is not legally married, he doesn't have anyone to be there for him. Now that my husband and I are married, we don't worry about that so much anymore. My husband and I are in a monogamous relationship, but I would be cautious if I were younger and needed things like PrEP (a medication that reduces the risk of contracting HIV.) That's not something I would feel comfortable going to a local physician and asking for. We don't have physicians here that are known to be affirming. I don't know that they're not; I just don't know how they are going to react.

We really don't have a lot of choices here in Scott County, and that's true for everybody. You have to go wherever you get in for an appointment. As far as health providers, we probably have more nurse practitioners than doctors. For many people in the community, it is so important to have a doctor whom you know would be affirming. That way, you could feel comfortable talking to them about an ingrown toenail. It wouldn't matter what you're there for.

In rural areas, I hear anecdotally about a lot of parents of trans teens who are thinking of moving because they don't think their child could ever have a life in a small community. They're already having to travel outside the community for healthcare. I think we'll see a lot of people having to move for healthcare reasons, much like young couples and younger workers are having to leave rural areas. Every gay person my age who is from my community moved away before they came out. The problems that young people run into once they move away is that costs of living are so different in places like California that they are finding themselves homeless. I've had messages from homeless aid organizations in these areas looking for advice on how to help these people.

Older people in the LGBTQ+ community have been through this before with the AIDS crisis. And yet there is soon to be an epidemic of older LGBTQ+ people for whom it is harder to find affirming assisted living facilities. I've had a few senior citizens reach out to me who literally have no one. Again, that's true of rural communities in general, but if a senior citizen has been abandoned by their families and their partner dies, they're alone if they never had children. There are a lot of factors that leave a gay senior

citizen alone in the world and dependent on a nursing home where they might have to go back in the closet because it's not safe for them to be out.

I often tell people that I thrive on coffee and spite. I tell young people who reach out to me and are looking for someone to talk to because they might be considering suicide, 'If you can't find any other reason to stay, do it out of spite.' I have my two children, my four grandchildren, my community. But sometimes, it's just spite.

As far as solutions go, I would say that in general, people minding their own business can get us very far in life."