

LI Life

FACES *of the* trans community

What 3 LI advocates
want you to understand
about them **E4**

Kerry Thomas is executive
director of Thursday's Child,
an HIV/AIDS nonprofit.



RICK KOPSTEIN

ACT 2

At 95, artist Lili Maglione
is still evolving **INSIDE**



MORGAN CAMPBELL

BUCKET LIST

A stretch of the Appalachian Trail
is just a day trip away **E2**

BUILDING COMMUNITY

Transgender llers choose visibility to help others



BY LIZA N. BURBY
Special to Newsday

Across the country, transgender kids and adults are facing myriad restrictions, from what bathroom they can use to the sports teams they can play on.

As of May, 25 states have banned gender-affirming care for transgender youth, according to the Human Rights Campaign. In some states, bills have been proposed to undermine and weaken nondiscrimination laws, require schools to out trans students to their parents and ban gender identity instruction.

Here on Long Island, Nassau County Executive Bruce Blakeman issued an executive order in February denying park permits to any women's and girls' teams, leagues or organizations that allow transgender females to participate. A judge overturned the order in May, citing Blakeman's effort to do it through executive decree rather than go through the county legislature. (In a recent survey conducted by Siena College in conjunction with Newsday, a majority of Long Islanders said they favored the ban, 53%-34% in Nassau and 53%-31% in Suffolk.)

Rights advocates across the country are fighting these bans and trying to increase understanding and empathy for the trans community. Among them are three Long Islanders: Kerry Thomas, Dreyah Griggs and Juli Grey-Owens.

All three say they felt from childhood that the gender



FINDING JOY IN SMALL VICTORIES

Kerry Thomas

A couple of years ago, when Kerry Thomas was out on a morning run past his old school, John H. Glenn High School in Elwood, he saw a Pride flag on display — and broke down in tears. As a student there 20 years before, he said he had been bullied so much that at 16 he tried to take his own life.

"It's so different now than when I was growing up," said Thomas, 38, who was assigned female at birth. "There was no visibility for the trans community. The message was 'you're a freak and you don't belong.' And that was validated by the media, peers, parents, teachers, administrators and psychologists."

After his suicide attempt, he didn't expect to wake up in the hospital. "But when I did, I decided this was my opportunity to assert myself and essentially be reborn. I came out and said I was going to live my life as a man," said Thomas, who uses he/him pronouns. "At the time, I didn't really even know what that could mean. I just decided I'm going to figure it out and somehow I did."

Thomas said he found the representation he was seeking in books. "Actually finding a resource by trans people . . . telling their own story, and being able to see them when I still didn't know anybody like me, that was the first time I was able to get enough information," he said. It's not lost on him that just a year ago his former school district was debating banning two LGBTQ books, a conversation which in itself he said is harmful.

Thomas said he began medically transitioning at 18, receiving surgery in San Francisco at 22. While he was recovering, he said he was motivated to pursue higher education. "Because I barely went to high school since I was so bullied, I was your profile of delinquency," Thomas said. "I very intentionally wanted to turn that around."

Thomas, who lives in East Northport, earned a master's degree in social work in 2016 and proudly displays his de-



Dreyah Griggs, above, edits the magazine **TransVibin'** and since last year has worked at Northwell's Division of Infectious Disease Research and Treatment in Manhasset.

they had been assigned at birth didn't fit, and that they faced intolerance in the communities where they lived, went to school and worked.

Because of the social and emotional issues they said they overcame, they're all dedicated to advocating for the trans community. Here

they share the stories of their journeys and why they're still pushing forward and trying to remain positive, despite the challenges:



Kerry Thomas of Thursday's Child, right, and others help with food distribution at an event for the LGBTQ community in East Patchogue last month.



Thomas was among those who fought Nassau's ban on transgender female athletes.

grees on his office wall at Thursday's Child, a nonprofit HIV/AIDS supportive service organization in Patchogue, where he is executive director.

Recently, he was among the advocates fighting Blakeman's trans athlete ban.

Growing up, Thomas said he wanted to play on the football team but was ignored by staff and made fun of by most peers. He's now active in ice hockey, cycling and boxing and said he believes trans male athletes are viewed differently from their female counterparts.

Referring to cisgender females, or women and girls whose gender identity corresponds to their assignment at birth, he said, "There's an assumption of being less capable, particularly in more physical sports. I think the trans athlete ban, which specifically targets trans women, is also rooted in that assumption."

Despite work that can be daunting at times, Thomas said he tries to make time for joy as well. For example, he was re-

cently part of an event supporting the Long Island Roller Rebels, the women's roller derby league that challenged Blakeman's order.

"When you're in something for the long haul, like the incremental progress for trans rights we've seen over the past 10 to 20 years, you also have to find some joy within that journey," Thomas said. "The people you meet along the way, the connections made within communities, the opportunities to learn and discover new things: All this can bring a sense of fulfillment and joy."

SPEAKING UP AGAINST STIGMA

Dreyah Griggs

As a child in Great Neck, Dreyah Griggs, a trans woman

of color, said she relied on her friends and family for support. "I grew up in a very religious and conservative neighborhood where anything different automatically stands out," she said.

Griggs, whose pronouns are she/her, said, "I always played with gender identity growing up. I used to wrap towels around my head and pretend it was hair and wear my sisters' clothes. But I started to begin my journey after high school. I started growing my hair and wearing more androgynous clothing."

She said she changed her name and pronouns in her early 20s and began hormone therapy a few years later. But the lack of a trans community on Long Island affected her.

"I had a really good support system in my family and friends, but I didn't have any

resources, any sense of self there," she said. "When it came to gender-affirming care, hanging out or trying to find like-minded people, I went to Queens and Manhattan."

She also traveled 2 1/2 hours from Great Neck to the Bronx every couple of weeks for help with services like changing her name and hormone therapy. She said it was worth it.

"I wanted to be in a waiting room with people that looked like me, that were there for the same things as me. It really gave me a sense of community," Griggs said.

In 2023, she was asked to be the associate care manager in Northwell's Division of Infectious Disease Center for AIDS Research and Treatment in Manhasset, a grant-funded program that serves Nassau

See COVER STORY on E6

Courageously flying the flag

COVER STORY from E5

and Suffolk for HIV testing and care.

It was a full-circle moment: After so many years of seeking out people who could understand her experiences, she's now part of creating a trans community on Long Island. Griggs helps connect clients with services like name change assistance, coverage for some medical procedures and hormone therapy referrals. She's also editor of the magazine *TransVibin'*, which highlights the transgender and gender non-conforming community.

Griggs, who is in her 30s and no longer lives in Great Neck, said for her, being both Black and trans has been a balancing act. "I deal with flack sometimes from the Black community because not everybody is open to LGBTQIA+ people. And I've stepped into places that just by my skin color, I'm not welcome. . . . But the older I got, the more comfortable I got, [and] it became a lot easier for me."

That's why she said she's determined to reach Long Island's transgender population to let people know about local services and try to help them overcome their fear of coming forward.

"There's a lot of stigma, and some people don't want to live out loud," Griggs said. "I respect that everybody doesn't have to be an advocate. But it creates an obstacle for reaching the population."

"I see how rewarding it is to be able to speak up and have a voice and the ripple effect that it has on the community," she said. "I can't turn back now. Whatever I have to do to help people, I'm willing to do that."

FOCUS ON HUMAN RIGHTS

Juli Grey-Owens

Juli Grey-Owens, 71, knew something was different when, at age 4, she tried on her mother's high heels. "That doesn't make someone transgender," said the Huntington resident. "But for me, it was like a bolt of lightning and brought up feelings I didn't



RICK KOPSTEIN



RICK KOPSTEIN

Juli Grey-Owens is a full-time advocate for transgender rights in New York as executive director of Gender Equality New York Inc. Above, she prepared to raise the flag at a Transgender Day of Visibility ceremony at a Suffolk government building last year.

said. She started electrolysis in 2002 and began to attend transgender events in 2003. "There was little transgender information at the time and no transgender civil rights in New York, which meant that we could be legally discriminated against in the areas of employment, housing and public services," she said.

As Grey-Owens became more comfortable expressing her gender identity publicly, she said she helped found the Long Island Transgender Advocacy Coalition in 2004 and held marches in Nassau to change the state and county human rights laws to add "gender identity" and "gender expression" to the list of protected classes.

It was just the beginning of her advocacy: In 2008, she said she was asked to serve on the board of the Empire State Pride Agenda, the now-defunct state LGBT advocacy organization.

Now a full-time advocate for trans rights in New York, Grey-Owens is executive director of the nonprofit Gender Equality New York Inc, whose mission is to support transgender, gender non-binary and intersex New Yorkers and their families. She delivers "Trans 101" education sessions across the state for health care providers, government agencies, police departments, school personnel and camp directors. Her emphasis, she said, is that everyone has a right to self-identify their gender and their sexual orientation.

Grey-Owens said that as awareness about the trans community becomes more widespread, so does the backlash.

"I've seen a lot of change over the 20 years that I've been doing this and I'm sad that some people feel that violence and discrimination has to be done to our community," she said. "On the other hand, there's a lot of good people that are questioning and want more information."

"All we want to do is just live our lives in peace," she said. "We're not looking to hurt anybody. . . . Maybe you don't understand who we are, but at least respect us as fellow human beings."

understand."

Grey-Owens, who uses she/her pronouns, said growing up, she would try on her mother's clothing and makeup in secret. This continued into high school. After earning an engineering degree and an MBA, she said she sought counseling and was advised to

figure out how to incorporate her gender experimentation into her life to avoid the mental and physical health issues that denying her gender identity could lead to.

Grey-Owens tried to meet other transgender people but said that was difficult on Long Island. She got married, contin-

ued her career in manufacturing, opened a store and became a parent — all that time presenting as a cisgender man.

A major turning point was losing her father in 2000 when she was 47. "It really made an impact on me that I needed to figure out a way to live my life authentically," Grey-Owens