

# Going



# Through

# Changes

Most college students spend these **crucial years** discovering who they are and wish to be in life. But for **transgender** and **non-binary** people, there's an extra layer of uncovering and pursuing their intrinsic gender identities. In addition to **changing** majors and hunting for internships, these students often find **themselves navigating** pronouns, bathrooms and the intersection of racism and transphobia.

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Last summer, Oseye Riddle (she/her) stared back at herself in the mirror and toyed around with pronouns. At the time, Riddle, a junior keyboard performance major at the University of Miami, had been presenting as a gender-nonconforming man. She was assigned male at birth, but throughout college she “enjoyed breaking rules of what men should look like”—unabashedly flaunting makeup, heels and dresses—and took pride in her rebellious, untraditionally masculine outlets of expression.

As months passed, however, Riddle’s discomfort with her tenor voice and thoughts of manhood intensified. She was petrified of being perceived as male and felt a special freedom and joy when presenting as feminine. After questioning herself for a while, Riddle took the plunge with the mirror test. “I didn’t like ‘he,’ I was neutral toward ‘they,’” Riddle said, “but—even though I was very scared at first—I was really happy when I said ‘she.’”

Riddle realized she was transgender, meaning that her assigned sex at birth didn’t align with her innate gender identity. She rebranded her anxiety as gender dysphoria, which is a medical term for the almost melancholy feelings of distress many trans people feel toward their anatomical characteristics. Riddle selected and embraced the name Oseye—meaning “one who is happy” in Egyptian—as a token to her “journey to be honest and kind” to herself.

Oaklin Keefe (they/them) said they empathize with Riddle’s journey. For Keefe, a 2020 UM graduate, the journey began when they transferred to a boarding high school for two years, granting them an opportunity to “figure out” their gender identity while abroad. When they first donned a pixie cut hairstyle, Keefe was instantly stamped by classmates as gay.

“I never identified as lesbian. That term never felt right with me,” said Keefe, who has always connected with the gender-neutral connotation of queerness. Gradually, they came to terms with being transgender non-binary, which is an identity falling under the trans umbrella that is not exclusively male or female. Keefe casually used they/them pronouns, but by senior year of college, couldn’t keep hiding behind their birth name anymore and publicly reintroduced themselves as Oaklin, a non-binary trans masculine person.

Both Riddle and Keefe set foot on the UM campus last fall with new names and pronouns. They had newly ignited senses of self-confidence that were tinged only slightly with fear of their peers’ impending reaction.

“It’s hard for trans folks to come out and be visible. They’re often dependent on their allies to build safer spaces for them, which creates complex difficulties,” said Dr. Gisela Vega, director of UM’s LGBTQ Student Center. “Institutions are still not fully embracing folks outside the binary, but we’ve been instrumental in helping different areas modify their practices to be more inclusive of our trans community.”

For example, Riddle’s Cane Card was reprinted to reflect her name change without requiring legal documentation, and the University of Miami honored Keefe’s request to announce their chosen name at commencement. Sadly, Dr. Vega said these bare-minimum accommodations “still don’t happen” at some colleges across the country.

Through initiatives like the IBIS Ally Network and yearly Greek Week pronoun campaign, UM’s LGBTQ Center has trained students, faculty and staff to be at the forefront of LGBTQ empowerment, receptive to discriminatory issues and welcoming of learners of all genders.

“When I came out on Facebook, I wasn’t expecting two professors I’m friends with to read my post, respond accordingly and instantly change how they refer to me,” Riddle said. While she was nervous at first about communicating with new mentors, she’s since found a “very supportive” classroom climate that keeps her dysphoria at bay.

Keefe, knowing their birth name would still appear on attendance sheets, opted to email professors over the summer to avoid awkward first-day confrontations and “get the point across” about the name they go by.

Deadnaming—the act of calling a trans person by their former or “dead” name—is dehumanizing when done intentionally. But everyone, of course, accidentally slips up sometimes. According to Riddle and Keefe, the best recovery from a mid-conversation mishap is to just self-correct and keep going. When people apologize and make a big fuss about it, they “throw unnecessary guilt on the trans person that we then feel pressured to alleviate,” Riddle said.

In terms of pronouns, Keefe noted the contrast between a teacher initially challenged by singular they/them usage and an assembly of UM students who, according to Keefe, once derogatorily hollered “he, she, it, whatever” at their footsteps.

When done “out of malice,” misgendering someone is a blatant gesture of transphobia, which Planned Parenthood defines as the “fear, hatred, disbelief or mistrust of” transness and the gender-variant population.

Transphobia encompasses a broad set of activities dismissing and invalidating trans and non-binary people’s existence, from deliberate pronoun mocking to some “compliments” that are actually nullifying. “OMG, I’d never guess you were trans!” may not seem like an obvious no-no, but to Riddle and Keefe, it’s a silent dog whistle that all trans people are expected to look a certain abnormal or inhuman way. “We must put our parameters aside. There’s no one way to look trans, non-binary or cis, for that matter,” said Dr. Vega, who applauded trans stars Elliot Page and Zaya Wade for loudening this narrative through their platforms.

Another exclusionary myth is that all trans people will—or must—unconditionally blend in as cisgender (individuals who don’t experience a mismatch between their internal and external beings) and undergo medical procedures. Vega underscored that each person’s transition is an “individualized” process and not one experience is the same.

With the average top surgery (an operation that reshapes a person’s chest to achieve the desired feminine or masculine contour) totaling up to \$10,000, according to Healthline, transitioning can be a costly and dangerous choice that involves “personal decisions” that “may not be for everyone.”

Ultimately, taking medical steps can be risky, but may be a necessary risk for some transgender people. Riddle, for instance, said hormone replacement therapy (a treatment process that injects estrogen into her body and blocks its testosterone production to feminize her secondary sex

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—Oseye Riddle  
UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI  
UNDERGRADUATE

characteristics) is necessary for her to combat gender dysphoria. Keefe on the other hand said they firmly believe that you don’t have to medically transition to be transgender.

For many trans individuals, simply going about everyday life in the body they aspire to live in can be expensive and potentially life-threatening. Figures from the European advocacy project Transrespect versus Transphobia Worldwide show that at least 350 gender-diverse people were murdered in 2020, a significant fraction of which were Black and Hispanic. Issues of passing, privilege and hate violence are painfully intertwined with socioeconomic and racial marginalization. In other words, those who are oppressed and cannot afford to physically transition or lack access to unisex bathrooms are disproportionately at risk.

Keefe has recognized their privilege as a white, “typical-looking” nonbinary person. “When you Google ‘androgynous,’ you see photos of people who look like me, and it’s nothing new,” said Keefe.

On the other hand, Riddle, a transgender woman of color, said she is in jeopardy “no matter what.” When she previously presented as a queer Black man, she adopted a hypervigilance that has since only multiplied as race and gender identity intersected. “Before coming out, I went to a memorial for Toyin Salau at the Torch of Friendship. That’s where I realized I could die at any minute, so I thought, I might as well be happy,” Riddle said. “I’d rather be honest to myself and in danger than lie to myself and still face danger.”

Eventually, trans and non-binary people at UM and beyond will feel seen and be treated like human beings. “We’re slowly progressing toward a more trans-friendly planet,” Vega said, but it’s a dream that won’t come true overnight. Equity demands education, which starts by having conversations about the gender spectrum, asking about pronouns, introducing pronouns alongside names and shutting down J.K. Rowling’s anti-trans rhetoric. “Our trans community deserves the utmost love, support and respect,” Dr. Vega said, because, in Keefe’s words, they’re not doing this because they want to. “We’re doing this to survive. It’s our outlet to live authentically.” 🗨

## Trans Terminology

Go beyond putting pronouns in your bio. Brush up on current gender grammar to speak respectfully about and toward the LGB[T]QIA community.

**Don’t** say “they’re a transgender” or “they transgendered.”

**Do** say “they’re trans,” “they’re a trans person,” “they are a transgender person” or “trans people.” The word transgender is an adjective, not a noun or verb.

**Don’t** say “male-to-female” or “female-to-male.”

**Do** say “trans woman” or “trans man.”

**Don’t** say “biologically female” or “biologically male.”

**Do** say “assigned female at birth” (AFAB) or “assigned male at birth” (AMAB).

**Don’t** say “they changed genders,” or “they had a sex reassignment operation.”

**Do** say “they transitioned” or “they underwent gender confirmation surgery.”

**Don’t** say “preferred pronouns.”

**Do** say “pronouns.” Pronouns are pronouns.

**Don’t** ask about genitalia when someone comes out.

**Do** listen to their story. Understand that being trans doesn’t revolve around surgeries and acknowledge your cisgender privilege.

**Don’t** assume all trans people are gay.

**Do** know that gender identity and sexual orientation are distinct qualities. What you identify as has nothing to do with who you are attracted to—if anyone at all.