

# Alum's open letter entreats SJS community to protect trans children

By Lucy Walker & Elizabeth Hu

**S**ara Rose Caplan wants to come home. But she feels Texas isn't safe for her anymore.

Feeling an urgency to speak on behalf of a community she believes is being ignored, Caplan ('11) wrote an open letter to SJS parents and alumni advocating for trans youth.

"It's not learning about trans people that turns kids trans," Caplan wrote on March 10th. "It's not learning about themselves that makes trans kids sad."

The 88th Texas Legislature has been in session since January and is set to end on May 29. In that time, the rights of trans children have been at the forefront of state-wide politics, part of a growing national debate on trans rights.

In a recent video interview with the Review, Caplan described her letter as a way of "trying to strategically shout at the void." She chose to specifically address the St. John's community, an influential group of people that she is personally connected to.

"I am not an outsider coming in to scold you about a theoretical problem. Trans people aren't an abstract political talking point," Caplan wrote. "I am a part of your community. I am your classmate, your friend, your neighbor."

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Although Caplan was initially skeptical that her message would reach her intended audience, "a lot more people read it than I assumed would."

Dozens of students reposted the letter on their Instagram stories. It dominated conversation at family meals and in PRISM board meetings. Several students even forwarded the letter to PRISM sponsor Kristiane Stapleton.

"It was bold and brave and urgent," Stapleton said. "It was necessary."

Caplan's own high school experience is a classic coming-of-age story: She was head prefect, swim team captain and Harvard graduate – "you could not have been more SJS Not-Without-Honor Prestigious Scholar Athlete than I was," Caplan wrote. She had it all, except the "context to understand myself." And she was miserable.

By the time Caplan graduated from St. John's, she suspected that she was "some kind of queer," but she did not even know that trans people existed. The only LGBTQ+ representation Caplan saw came in the form of crude comedies and low-brow cultural tropes.

College expanded her horizons. Caplan discovered trans influencer Natalie Wynn, a popular social media creator, who helped her realize that a trans person "can be smart, funny and witty," not just a murder victim on CSI. Seeing a successful, visible trans woman was a revelation. Soon after, Caplan realized that she herself was trans.

After college, Caplan moved to California and, over the next few years, gained confidence in her identity. This personal shift mirrored an increasingly tolerant and accepting attitude in broader society. The federal government implemented protections for same-sex relationships and medical transitioning. In 2015, the Supreme Court case *Obergefell v. Hodges* legalized same-sex marriage in all 50 states. In 2019,

the Equality Act was passed, prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity in employment, education and public businesses.

More recently, in the summer of 2021, U.S. passport applicants no longer need to submit medical certification to change the gender written on their passports. An "X" gender marker was made available last April to designate a citizen as nonbinary or gender nonconforming.

Ten years ago, transgender rights were not a pressing issue for politicians, but the current climate is far more precarious. Now, although trans rights are far more accepted socially, they are under more legislative scrutiny. 57 bills restricting gender-affirming care have been proposed in Austin in 2023 alone. Many of these are supported by prominent Houston-area representatives.

According to Axios Houston, legislators have proposed more "anti-trans" bills in Texas than in any other state. These bills would restrict medical transitions for minors, make it more difficult for someone to change their gender on official documents, prevent athletes from competing on college sports teams that do not match their assigned genders and prohibit drag performances on public property. Houston-area representatives introduced more than two dozen of these bills.

"My hope is that the pendulum is going to come back down soon. We've hit some extremes," said Director of Community Engagement and Young Conservatives Club sponsor D'Hania Hunt. "Then more people that are more educated and have more wherewithal with them can bring the pendulum back down and move things forward again."

Caplan thinks members of today's trans community have the context to understand their identities – they are just not allowed to express them.

"It's just very different kinds of suffering," Caplan said. "One is a suffering of not knowing and one is a suffering of knowing."

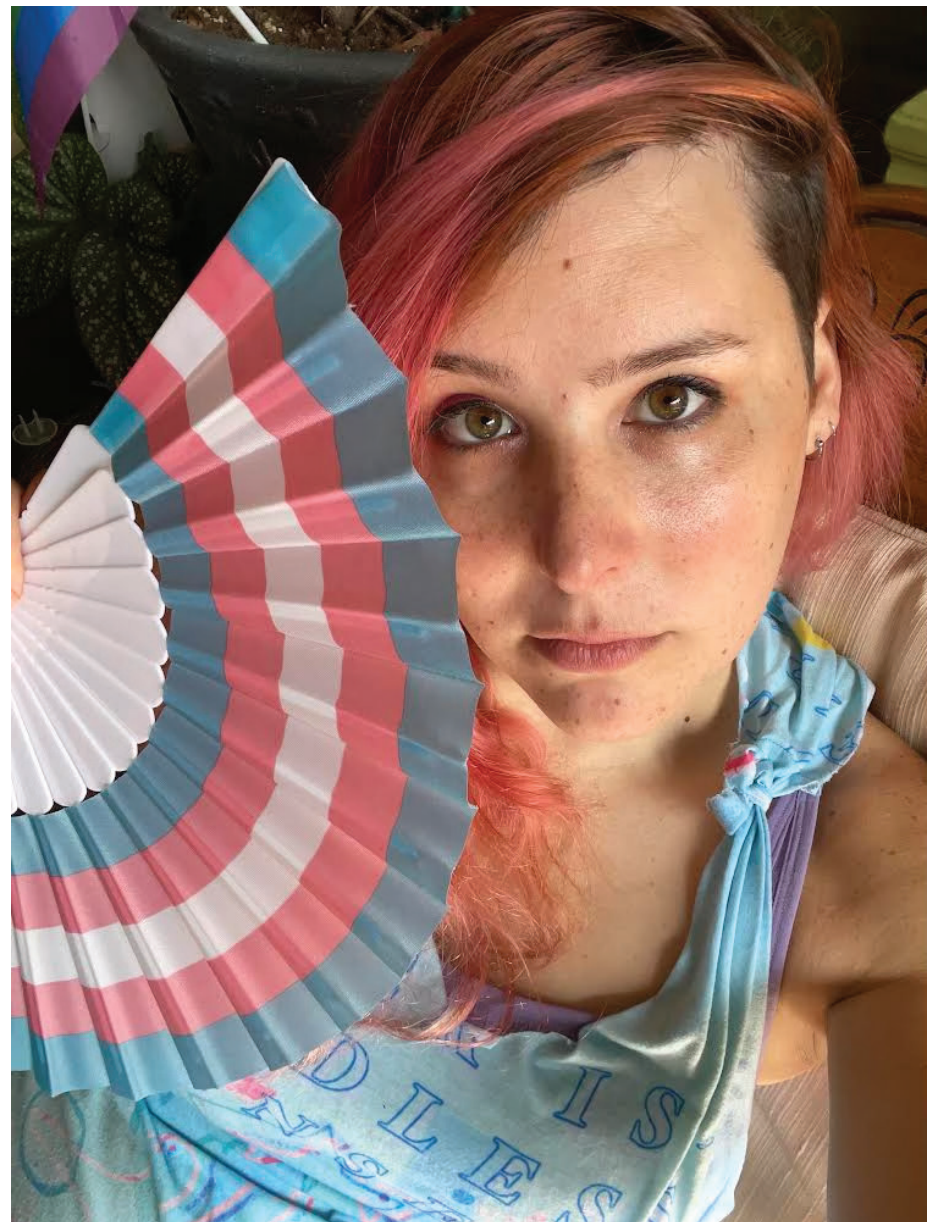
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In her letter, she explained that her family has always placed immense importance on their southern heritage. Caplan's parents moved back to the United States from Saipan, an island in the northern Pacific, before she was born to ensure that she was a seventh-generation Texan. Though she lives in California, her Texas roots run deep.

"There's anti-trans and anti-queer bills being passed in states all over the country," she said. "But I feel the ones in Texas the strongest, selfishly because I like being able to go back and visit friends and family – and I want to feel safe doing that."

Among those who read Caplan's letter were PRISM board members Jack Lovett and Shaheen Merchant, who are both trans. On March 24, at the first PRISM assembly since 2019, Lovett, a senior, noted in her speech to the Upper School that St. John's has come a long way in promoting inclusivity over the last decade: "It would be impossible for a trans student to stand on this stage, let alone be out on our campus."



In California, Caplan feels safe expressing her trans identity, but Texas legislators are trying to prevent transgender youth from transitioning. In her letter, Caplan called these bills a "legal war" against queer teens.

PHOTO | Sara Rose Caplan

When Merchant started her sophomore year, she was still presenting masculine even though she knew it was not right for her. Over the course of the year, she began testing the limits of the dress code – and when she wore a skirt to school, she was threatened with suspension. A year later, Merchant is now allowed to present more feminine.

When asked about Caplan's letter, Merchant said, "I was glad she did because someone has to. It can be really hard to do something when you're in the thick of it, but she has a little more confidence and power."

In public schools across the country, many teachers are legally obligated to out students or ignore their preferred names and pronouns.

Arkansas, Mississippi, Virginia and West Virginia have already banned transgender students from competing on school sports teams that do not match their assigned gender. The Virginia government also adopted a model policy through the Department of Education that asks college faculty and staff to refer to trans students by their given names and pronouns unless a parent files a written petition; it also requires colleges not to disclose trans students' identities to their parents.

While clothes and pronouns may seem trivial, Merchant cautions that "people can underestimate how little things in your life can add up if it's happening every day."

Lovett presents less feminine than she would like, citing recent violence against trans people in Texas. According to the Dallas Morning News, Texas leads the nation in transgender murders. She is terrified that, if she were to present more feminine, she would be vulnerable to attack.

Caplan, too, fears for the consequences of the new legislation in her home state.

"I'm afraid that the extreme rhetoric of the American Right will inspire someone to beat me up if they see me walking out of the Kolache Factory or Goode Company," she wrote.

Stapleton has noticed a climate of fear and anxiety permeating circles of queer students and allies. Most, she said, "don't understand the need for this legislation."

"What's happening in Texas is part of a larger political attempt to demonize trans people," Stapleton said. "While I'm alarmed and upset by this happening in Texas, I am even more alarmed and upset that it is not just one bill; it is part of a larger wave."

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Younger generations, which have been exposed to dialogue around LGBTQ+ identity for most of their lives, are taking action. According to the Pew Research Center, 63% of Gen Z and millennial voters said they know someone who is trans, while just 28% of people over 74 said the same. Nearly 80% of adults under 40 support the Equality Act, while less than 50% of Americans aged 75 and older agree. Additional research has found that 62% of Gen Z agreed that trans men are men and trans women are women. Stapleton says that protecting affirming spaces like PRISM is essential to student wellbeing.

"As the rest of the world tells you that it's not okay to be yourself, it becomes even more vital that we preserve spaces for exploration, community and joy," Stapleton said.

Caplan acknowledges the role that members of the St. John's play in "waging this crusade."

"That also means that the current political situation was almost certainly caused by many members of the SJS community, and that even more of you allowed it to happen by passively standing by," Caplan wrote. "If that sounds harsh, it's meant to."

At the end of her letter, Caplan pleaded with the audience to remember trans kids who aren't old enough to escape and to take into account the families who live in fear of being punished for loving and supporting their children. "Please, for a second," she wrote. "Consider what y'all are letting happen!"