Alum’s open letter elets SJ community to protect trans children

By Lucy Walker & Elizabeth Hu

Sara 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 (’13) wrote an open letter to SJ community 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 kids trans.”

The 86th 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 see this every day; it is not abstract political talk from on high.”

Caplan wrote. “I am a part of your community. I am your classmate, your friend, your neighbor.”

Although Caplan was initially skeptical that her message would reach her intended audience, she’s encouraged more people read it than she assumed would.

Dozens of students reposted the letter on the school’s social media pages and the school held a planned conversation at family meals and in PRISM board meetings. Several students even forwarded Caplan’s letter to PRISM sponsor Kristiane Stapleton.

“It was bold and brave and urgent,” Stapleton said. “I am a part of your community have the context to understand the need for this legislation.”

Stapleton has noticed a climate of fear among many members of the SJ community, and, over the next few years, gained a more obvious and visceral acceptance attitude in broader society. 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. This year 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 that I think people want to make sure don’t happen 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.”

In public schools across the country, many teachers are legally obligated to out trans students from competing on school sports teams that match their gender. The American Right will inspire someone to do it, Caplan 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.”

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.”

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.

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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

“You can’t get used to how scary it is,” Merchant said. “But you get used to it being unsafe.”

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Younger generations, which have been exposed to dialogue around LGBTQ+ identities 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.

“On the whole, people realize that it is more vital that we preserve spaces for exploration, community and joy.”

Stapleton said. “That also means that the current political situation was almost certainly caused by many members of the SJ 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 for a more open conversation. "I want to see more present for more difference, she would be vulnerable to attack. Merchant, 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.”

“When’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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