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'Comics is my most fluid language': SCSU assistant professor explores gender identity through drawing

By Brian Zahn

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KC Councilor, an associate professor of communications, helped in discovering his identity as a transgender man through cartoons and comics, at Southern Connecticut State University in New Haven April 1, 2021. He holds his self-published book, "Between You and Me - Transitional Comics."

Photo: Brian A. Pounds / Hearst Connecticut Media

NEW HAVEN — Local cartoonist KC Councilor owes more than just his livelihood to comics — they've gifted him a significant part of his identity.

"It was through drawing, and not until I was in my 30s, that I realized I was trans and wanted to transition. Now both of those things are a fundamental part of my identity," he said.

limited to small bits of media, such as the episode of the sitcom “Ellen” in which the lead character played by comedian Ellen DeGeneres comes out as a lesbian — an episode Councilor taped on VHS.

“It would have made a big difference to know any out queer person growing up, and I didn’t,” he said.

Last week, during which Trans Visibility Day fell, Councilor and his partner spoke with a support group for parents of trans children — many who worry that their children will never be happy or find love amid a national environment rife with transphobia. Despite those threats, Councilor feels it’s important to demonstrate examples of trans adults who overall are doing fine.

Too often, Councilor believes, the narratives around trans people involve a universal experience of instantly recognizing their own gender identity from the moment they have conscious memories. Despite his choice of two-dimensional, linear comics as a medium, Councilor hopes through art to give more definition to the sometimes ambiguous nature of being trans.

Councilor said he was presenting himself as a “butch” lesbian when he was a graduate student and took a course with the famed comic artist Lynda Barry in 2012. He said he was comfortable with “discomfort,” having a suspicion for about 10 years he was not “a little blonde girl” as many had known him in his adolescence but being unable to say it with words.

Comics changed that.

“I really feel like comics is my most fluid language. It takes a lot of time and practice, but it’s something that is approachable and accessible to a lot of people,” he said. “Being trans is a very complicated thing to move through the world; I find it’s one of the best ways to communicate that experience to others.”

In that graduate class, Barry would ask students to draw themselves — but not in a traditional way. Students would be asked to draw themselves differently, such as in their youth or in old age. The latter exercise is what Councilor credits as being a breakthrough moment.

continuing my life as a woman," he said.

That moment, he said, "pulled it out of me."

Councilor has published an illustrated memoir, "Between You and Me: Transitional Comics," but his day job is as an assistant professor of communications at Southern Connecticut State University. Like his mentor Barry, Councilor starts every class by asking students to spend about three minutes drawing a sketch of themselves on an index card.

"I give them a theme. Yesterday, it was draw yourself skateboarding with a hot dog. Sometimes they're ridiculous, sometimes related to what we're doing," he said.

Primarily, Councilor sees it as an educational tool with multiple benefits — it's a good centering exercise so students feel more mentally present in the class; it gives quieter students an opportunity to participate and feel more comfortable sharing; and it also often surprises students at the end of the semester when they receive their sketches back and realize that they've improved just through practice and repetition.

However, Councilor also sees a benefit to giving students an opportunity to experiment; it was through comics that he was able to try on new haircuts when he was on the verge of recognizing his own gender identity, he said.

Councilor said he believes it's important for there to be trans people in the public sphere to counterbalance anti-trans narratives in politics and media that are consumed by queer youth.

"The messaging is that you don't belong," he said. "You can't use the public bathrooms or play on the teams, like where can you go? It's a squeezing-out of public life."

Recently, the state of Arkansas passed a bill banning gender-affirming health care for trans youth, which was described as "the single most extreme anti-trans law to ever pass through a state legislature" by American Civil Liberties Union Deputy Director Chase Strangio, [according to NBC News](#). The bill now sits on the desk of Arkansas Gov. Asa Hutchinson.

from competing in high school athletics in league with their gender. President Joe Biden's administration pulled federal support for the lawsuit this year.

Amid the increase in unwelcome attention on trans people — especially measures that limit trans youth — Councilor said he believes one of the most useful things he can do is share his own experiences widely.

"I have students who come to me a year or two after they've been in my class say they're coming out as trans and it made a difference to them that I was out in class," he said.

Councilor said Connecticut and SCSU are comparatively much better places to be a trans academic than elsewhere.

"There are truly not all that many places where being a trans professor would be welcomed," he said. "I feel very grateful that I'm supported there and to be able to come out on the first day of class and to feel safe and comfortable doing that on behalf of students."

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