

## Cyryna's Story

As a young teenager I began wearing my hair long, dressing like other girls, taking hormones and started expressing the gender that I feel inside.

At that time, I was having a difficult time with my dad because he hated the fact that I'm transgender. He started out by criticizing me a lot and then he started to hit me. The only option I felt like I had was to run.

I ran away from home. Sometimes I would sleep on the streets, other times it was in the park, or hang out at the homeless shelter.

My mother worried about me. She knew I was on the streets and she thought that the police would help me and bring me somewhere safe. She was wrong. The police arrested me because it is against the law to be a runaway.

From the moment I was arrested, to my sentencing, I felt like I was treated differently. The judge gave me a 1 year sentence without considering what might have sent me out to the streets. I was so young at the time, I didn't have a voice, and I didn't know how to defend myself. In Hawaii, transgender girls like myself, were housed with the girls and there were other transgender people there who were runaways too.

After about a month, my case manager said he was trying to find a place for me but he told me that nobody would accept me to the program because I am transgender. He said he would like to move me out of the youth facility, but there were no placements or foster homes that would accept me. It made me feel neglected to think that no one wanted me and there was nowhere to go home to.

Later that year, the girl's facility was being remodeled so they transferred the girls to Utah. I was not allowed to go with them because I'm transgender and I was transferred to the boys unit. A number of the medical staff and counselors spoke out against me being placed with the boys but the facility ignored them.

It was very clear I would be targeted for abuse. The director even ordered the staff not to allow me to interact with the male wards for this reason. I was told not to sit close to them or even look at them. I had to sit one or two chairs away from the nearest boy even during free time and meals, which made me feel alone. I had my own cell, whereas the boys slept together in a dormitory-style unit. But, this didn't protect me from sexual harassment and abuse every day. The boys began to sexually harass me right away and would call me names.

When we were watching TV the boys would touch me; they would pull out their private parts and show me. They would come up behind me and grab me and rub against me. The whole time I was on the boys' side I was threatened with violence and rape, touched, and experienced



constant harassment. The staff were always present and sometimes laughed or encouraged the boys' conduct.

When I told one of the officers I trusted how tired I was of the abuse, he told me to "just ignore it." I tried to talk to other staff members about what was happening but the abuse continued. The boys threatened to beat me up if I wrote a complaint, and because the officers never did anything to help, I didn't file an official grievance.

I had become really depressed, I couldn't sleep, I couldn't eat, and felt anxious and sick most of the time. I felt like I couldn't trust any of the staff and it felt like no one wanted to help me.

There was an intense feeling of shame and isolation. When you are rejected by your family because of the way you are and then sent to the criminal system for not having a place to call home, and then end up being sexually abused, it felt like the worst punishment. I cannot begin to describe how painful that was for me.

It would have helped me a lot if I could have spoken to someone who could have told me that it wasn't my fault and I didn't deserve it. If I could have spoken to someone who would have believed me and advocated for me, I believe it would have been better for me. There were no LGBTQ advocates that could have come into the facility. If they were aware of what was going on, I believe they would have helped me.

I'm hopeful that there will be change because of PREA. My testimony in front of the National Prison Rape Elimination Commission in 2006 helped inform national policies that would protect LGBTQ people like me, from ever going through what I went through. Speaking out has been healing for me and being able to talk about it brings me closer to having a sense of peace.

I accept that I'm different, but I affirm my humanity and my rights to have the officers responsible for protecting me and do their jobs, rather than abusing me and refusing to stop others from abusing me.

We all have the right to be free from sexual violence and sexual harassment. We are in these youth facilities to help rehabilitate us so we can be law abiding adults. It should not matter whether we are small in stature, with brown or black skin, or if we have a different gender identity or sexual orientation.