

Madeleine Ball, BS  
Vanderbilt University School of Medicine  
Nashville, Tennessee

“What scared you the most as a child?” was the question posed one cold January morning as the lights dimmed in the lecture hall, my coffee still steamy and warming my frozen hands. Dr. Kaufman’s opening slide during our Sexual Health and Medicine elective depicted little kids playing, a teddy bear, Christmas cookies baking in the oven. We all laughed as she revealed one particularly precocious looking child was, in fact, her. She continued, “Was it the dark? An angry teacher? Maybe scary news, injury or fear of failure?” The silence in the room was palpable, the kind that happens rarely, but is so distinct when it does. Clearly, today’s lecture would be different.

The slide changed. “What if your greatest fear was choosing which bathroom to use? Where one door leads to getting yelled at, the other to getting beat up?”

The statistics of homophobia, transphobia, and anti-LGBTQ+ bias are, put bluntly, frightening. A vast majority report harassment, negative remarks, and physical assault leading to increased rates of suicidality and depression.<sup>1,2</sup> As anti-trans bills continue to be adopted, this trend is far from improving.<sup>3</sup>

Dr. Kaufman continued, providing some background into how this conversation relates to her role as a urologist. How a surgeon is not solely a technician, but a conversation starter, who must build strong relationships of trust with her patients. Gender affirming care, though with some complications, overwhelmingly improves the lives of patients experiencing gender dysphoria. She closed, emphasizing these cases represent an exercise in collaboration across specialties and, above all else, demand a culture of respect.

The next day, the lecture still brewing at the top of my mind, I rotated in clinic to see post-op patients. I’d already seen and admired Dr. Kaufman’s remarkable adeptness as a surgeon in the O.R., but had spent less time in clinic. Tasked with checking on patients, I entered the first room of the day. I was greeted by a 45-year-old woman with a tie-dyed shirt and a bright smile. After introducing myself and making small talk, knowing she was a patient 6 months out from vaginoplasty, I asked “how is everything going?” Her smile broadened. “Fantastic,” she started, subsequently gazing down, clearly trying to collect her thoughts. She looked up, apologizing, a small tear forming in the side of her eye. “I don’t know how to explain this, but I feel like myself...for the first time.”

Dr. Kaufman and the Sexual Health and Medicine course not only confirmed my strong aspiration to become a urologist, but, more importantly, shaped my perspective on the world and the surgeon I hope to become. One that not only is technically astute, but also emotionally intelligent. One that sees their patient as a person first, and a surgical case second. Who thinks

of themselves as not only a highly-trained specialist, but a support system, a teammate, a community member and advocate.

People who provide those true “aha” moments are rare in life, but once you meet them, there’s no turning back.

Sources:

1. *2022 National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health.*; 2022.
2. *Key Terms and Concepts in Understanding Gender Diversity and Sexual Orientation Among Students.*; 2015.
3. Ronan W. *2021 Officially Becomes Worst Year in Recent History for LGBTQ State Legislative Attacks as Unprecedented Number of States Enact Record-Shattering Number of Anti-LGBTQ Measures Into Law.*; 2021.