

Ferris finds acceptance at Southwestern

By Tessa Castor
Staff reporter

Though his name on Blackboard and Self-Service is Abbey, don't be fooled – he goes by Ruairi. Ruairi Ferris, English and secondary education junior, may be one of the campus' only openly-out transgender students.

During his middle school and high school years, Ferris, an Arkansas City native, said he always knew he was different. After coming out as a lesbian, he thought that was it.

"Once, a high school classmate asked if I was trans," said Ferris. "I thought that was very preposterous. I had half-baked information."

Ferris plans on marrying his fiancé of three years, Morgan, after graduation. The two met at an event for a University of Kansas LGBTQ+ organization, though at the time, Ferris was only out as a lesbian. He was struggling with an eating disorder in an attempt to avoid chest growth, and Morgan noticed and became worried.

Ferris said, "I struggled with body image. Being a lesbian just wasn't right."

Morgan, though not the first to ask, questioned if Ferris was transgender. For the first time, Ferris came out, and he said he felt an immediate wave of relief and clarity with the realization.

"When I told my friends, they were like, 'No shit, Sherlock,'" said Ferris. While he has come

out to his professors and therapist, Ferris has not told his parents out of fear for their reaction.

"I would not wish being transgender on anyone," said Ferris. "You can be fired at will, there are financial struggles – not to mention family and friend prejudice."

Southwestern is the first school Ferris has been out to faculty and staff as well as students. Ferris said he has received mostly respectful responses to his sexuality. Students in the education department are particularly curious, as they may see students



Ruairi Ferris

like Ferris in their classrooms one day. While some may slip up with a name or pronoun, Ferris said people are usually very apologetic after mistakes.

"So far, all teachers have been very ready to accept me," said Ferris. "When I say I go by Ruairi and use male pronouns, they just say

'Thanks for letting me know.'"

Sheryl Erickson, associate professor of education, stands out to Ferris as a particularly supportive faculty member. Because Ferris' name is Abbey on Self-Service, Erickson had used it to assign seating on the first day of the spring semester. Erickson said she was upset with herself for making the mistake when she realized Ferris' situation.

"In that moment, I'm sure he wondered, 'Do I belong here?'" said Erickson.

Since then, Erickson has encouraged Ferris to get his Blackboard and Self-Service name changed. Erickson even reached out to administration to figure out a way to change the name without touching legal documents.

Erickson said, "We both realize that, for legal purposes, his records have to be what they have to be. But there has to be another way."

Before Ferris, Erickson said she had never had an openly-transgender student in class before, though she doubts that means there were not closeted students.

"I know there are," said Erickson. "Statistically speaking, there has to be. I want it to be okay for students to say, 'That's who I am.'"

Before coming to Southwestern, Ferris attended Cowley Community College, the University of Central Oklahoma and the University of Kansas. He received an associate

degree in general arts from Cowley. After graduating from SC, Ferris hopes to acquire a teaching job.

He said, "I hope to get a job right out of the gate either close to the hometown or where a town needs a teacher who will invest in their students."

While not at school, Ferris works full-time at the USD 465 district office and part-time as a caretaker for a special-needs student in the district.

Erickson said Ferris may receive some prejudice in the education field one day, though she expects that mostly in more rural, isolated communities. In the end, however, she said Ferris' quality as an educator will be more important than sexual orientation.

"As an educator one day, I want Ruairi to not be defined by his gender status, but by his passion for education and secondary English," said Erickson.

Lori Gragert, early childhood education senior, is president of EdBuilders. EdBuilders hosted a workshop by GLSEN, the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network, in the fall. The Kansas National Education Association focuses on inclusionary practices for LGBTQ+ students and educators.

Inclusionary practices may include the reassignment of gender-neutral restrooms in public areas. On campus, the

library restrooms are now designated as gender-neutral. This push came from EdBuilders after the GLSEN workshop.

Gragert said, "If we start small on campus, hopefully other groups will help us with this cause."

She said Ferris' story hits close to home, as a relative has recently come out as transgender and experienced bullying before switching schools.

"Ruairi's journey has influenced our department to be more open, not just looking at our own classrooms, but at how we can support students who are here, on this campus," said Gragert. "It changes the way we think, how we give presentations, how we talk in everyday classes. We hope we're creating a safe and secure environment for Ruairi and other students."

Ferris said that, on top of bathroom stall changes, he believes Southwestern would benefit from workshops and educational seminars for students to demystify the LGBTQ+ community.

"For example, pansexuality is not an attraction to cookware," said Ferris. "The first step in changing social norms is education."

"Trans women, trans people, are not scary," said Ferris. "I'm just a person trying to live my best life."

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Gender-neutral restrooms accommodate LGBTQ+

By Shawn Knepper
Staff reporter

Gender equality is something many are striving to find, including those affiliated with LGBTQ+ community. For schools and places of business, the question of having a public bathroom outside the two sexes has been a debate.

If you walk past the movie section on the main floor of Deets Library, you'll notice the

bathrooms once having both men and women on different sides have changed. Both bathrooms are now accessible for both sexes.

"I think this is a good step forward as an open community and can lead in more doorways for diversity" said Tanner Schartz, theatre junior. "I'm a firm believer that this will lead to more schools and public places becoming more welcoming."

Having these gender-neutral bathrooms not only shows a positive affect for people who are not comfortable in bathrooms of their biological sex. It also shows support for parents and caregivers of infants. Either way, the push toward having gender-neutral bathrooms in schools, restaurants, libraries and public parks will increase diversity.

The decision of making the switch to the library bathrooms

was completed by the cabinet of Brad Andrews, president.

Ross Peterson-Veatch, vice president of academic affairs and dean of the college, said, "The library bathrooms on the first floor were a suggested location from Sheryl Erickson, a professor in the education division. She asked me if we can do that, and I brought that to the President's Cabinet and we passed the suggestion."

Peterson-Veatch said the col-

lege is open to more buildings on campus turning restrooms gender-neutral.

"I think all schools need to consider their particular circumstances, their histories, their values and their priorities, and then decide whether this is something that makes sense for them," said Peterson-Veatch.

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