

Be an Upstander

Reflection by LGBTQ+ Initiative Team Member A Pollicino (they/them)

My youngest nephew just got back from a weeklong family retreat at the Cape May Marianist retreat house in NJ. Since he turned 11 this year, he got to be one of the cool kids in the pre-teen age group! I can remember going on retreat there every summer from the time I was little. Finally moving from being a super star to the pre-teen group is a big deal! Like many Catholic retreats there is a lot of small group sharing, prayer, and reflection at Mary's House. If you know the Marianists you know there is also plenty of food, music, and laughter. Perhaps unique to Cape May is the homey atmosphere, educational skits complete with puppets that always had good advice, and an epic variety show of unmatched talent!

These retreats were my family's introduction to the Marianists and their values of welcome and hospitality. I was glad my nephew and parents were carrying on the tradition of attending retreat each year. Unsurprisingly, Justin fits right in. The kid is a good egg. He is kind, thoughtful, and genuinely cares about others. These qualities align with the hospitality of The Cape where the goal is largely to make people feel like they belong to one big family.

I often share a lesson Justin taught me about belonging a few summers ago. Having grown up in the 80s and 90s I had been taught what a bystander is since bullying was a big topic when I was in grade school. Justin's generation is one step ahead. They learn how to be an "upstander". He explained to me that an upstander is a person who sticks up for somebody if they see anyone being bullied. Simple yet impressive. This includes standing up for people who are different from you even if you don't fully understand their lived experience. Around this time, he had also learned about race and racism. While we grew up in a very segregated town and went to predominantly white schools and churches growing up, Justin did not need much of an explanation about racism. He heard "racism is wrong", "it hurts people's feelings", and that it can make people feel like they don't belong. I was glad that not only was he learning about race, but that he also knew being an active upstander was an important value to share and practice.

The above-mentioned qualities make Justin one of my best allies. Since I came out as trans and nonbinary later in life, he knew me for quite some time with my old name and pronouns. Like my upbringing, he wasn't taught what it means to be trans at home, school, or church. Without an elaborate explanation or full understanding, he adopted my new name and pronouns. We were best buds, so this simple change in behavior wasn't a big deal to him. From time to time, he would ask me about being trans and I'd respond with a simple "well, I just never felt like a boy or a girl" and he would shrug and say "ok" and go back to whatever we were doing. This was usually riding his bike while I was walking my dogs or giving me pointers on the best way to finish making a cardboard replica of the titanic for him to sink in the backyard.

While it was easy for him to just call me “A” and use they/them pronouns, he also wasn’t shy about calling people out when they got either of those wrong. For most of my friends and family, I was the first “they/them” in their lives and a lot of people slipped calling me by my deadname or using the wrong pronouns. Justin would simply and firmly interject with “you mean A” or “THEY” before I could even think of whether I wanted to ignore the mistake or not. In the beginning of my social transition, I tried to seize teachable moments to *call people in* (rather than call them out) and explain why pronoun etiquette and using someone’s chosen name is important. I was amused and thankful when Justin stood up for me with the righteous determination of an active ally.

Sometimes I wonder where and who I will be welcomed by since you never know how people will respond to trans identity. I am lucky to have an affirming family and a nephew who has always made me feel like I belong. It doesn’t take much. Not only does he model how to be an upstander, he regularly reflects Marianist values of welcome and inclusion. I invite others to practice this simple allyship for the trans people in their families, schools, and parishes.