

Young faces, strong voices, brave stances, proud choices

Meet 4 young torchbearers for trans, nonbinary rights

Matt Alderton Special to USA TODAY

In the United States, one must typically be 14 years old to have a job, 16 years old to get a driver's license, 18 years old to vote, 21 years old to buy alcohol, 25 years old to serve in Congress and 35 years old to be president. Activism, however, is ageless. When they believe in something, Americans can advocate for it no matter how old they are. Or how young.

Cases in point: 17-year-old Rebekah Bruesehoff, 18-year-old Eli P., 19-year-old Eris R. and 21-year-old Jay Jones. In spite of their young age, or perhaps because of it, these four young people — all of who identify as transgender or nonbinary — are standing up and speaking out on behalf of the LGBTQ+ community.

Although their activism comes with great personal risk, data from the American Civil Liberties Union suggests that it's needed more than ever. At least 510 anti-LGBTQ+ bills were introduced in state legislatures in 2023, according to the ACLU. At least 487 more have been introduced so far in 2024, the group says.

Against that backdrop, Rebekah, Eli, Eris and Jay share their stories, their motivations and their hopes for a better, more accepting future. Eli and Eris asked that their last names be withheld.

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Rebekah Bruesehoff went viral at age 10 when her mom posted a picture of her holding a sign that said, "I'm the scary transgender person the media warned you about." To the extent she has an "agenda," she says, it's "to make the world a better place for everybody." NICHOLE HOWARD

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Rebekah Bruesehoff

Rebekah Bruesehoff was 10 years old when Donald Trump rescinded a federal directive protecting transgender students in public schools. Her mother was invited to speak at a protest, and Rebekah — who is trans — decided to join. She went viral when her mom posted a picture of her on social media holding a sign that said, “I’m the scary transgender person the media warned you about.”

“I never planned on doing advocacy, but I was inspired to make a difference when I saw the need, and when I recognized the privilege that I have to do it,” says Rebekah, who for the first time that day heard stories from other trans people who were not as loved and supported as she was. “When the picture of me went viral, it gave me a platform. And I knew I needed to use that.”

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Rebekah Bruesehoff

That was in 2017. Seven years later, Rebekah is getting ready for her senior year in high school. She reads books, plays field hockey, sings in three different a capella groups and performs in musical theater. And whenever she can, she speaks to adults — including educators, businesspeople, media, clergy and elected officials — on behalf of transgender and nonbinary youth.

“People often think trans kids have some sneaky agenda, but my agenda is just to study for my math test or go to the beach with my friends,” says Rebekah, who in 2023 was named to GLAAD’s annual “20 Under 20” list and in 2021 co-wrote “A Kids Book About Being Inclusive,” a how-to that helps kids and families embrace diversity. “Actually, that’s not true. I do have a bigger agenda: I want to make the world a better place for everybody so they can safely and bravely be themselves.”



“I have a voice, and I want to use it”: Aspiring filmmaker Eli P., who came out as transgender in sixth grade, shares his experiences with others through the It Gets Better Project’s Youth Voices program. MAXWELL POTHS

Eli P.

When Eli P. came out as transgender in sixth grade, he wasn’t immediately comfortable in his new skin.

“For the first few years I was out, I was definitely not into it. It seemed like a burden. I didn’t want to be seen as trans, so I was stealth — which means not telling anyone at school. I started at a whole new school, so I could do that,” says Eli, who plans to attend Sarah Lawrence College as a freshman in the fall. “Then I got top surgery ... and I became much more in touch with the good parts of being trans.”

An aspiring filmmaker, Eli decided to make a short film about his experience in a trans support group, and about his finally coming out as trans at school.

“That was the beginning of me being

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Eli P.

comfortable with my trans-ness,” says Eli, who in 2023 was appointed to the It Gets Better Project’s Youth Voices program, through which exceptional young people share their stories and words of advice to other LGBTQ+ youth. “I have a voice, and I want to use it.”

He hopes his voice will help others find theirs. “All of the political attacks on trans youth right now are happening because people don’t know a trans person. They’ve never met one, and they probably haven’t seen one because there’s so few trans characters in movies and TV shows, especially ones who are positive role models with happy lives.

“Showing trans people in mainstream media just living their lives — especially trans youth — will open the door to so much more acceptance.”



"Nobody's free until we're all free," says Eris R. "That's the core of what I believe in, and it's why I fight for so many different groups." MAXWELL POTR

Eris R.

Eris R. also is a member of the It Gets Better Project's Youth Voices program. Identifying as Black, nonbinary, neurodivergent and queer, Eris describes their advocacy as intersecting race, gender, sexuality and accessibility.

"I grew up with a passion for diversity, and I'm now using that appreciation to fight for everyone," Eris says. "Nobody's free until we're all free. That's the core of what I believe in, and it's why I fight for so many different groups."

That appreciation for diversity began while attending school in Chicago. "My school had a sort of 'Cultural Day' that was very influential to me, where we immersed ourselves in appreciating everyone in their own cultures," Eris says. "I got really into the Black Lives Matter movement, and that was the start of me realizing injustice and recognizing that it's wrong."

Eris later attended high school in Montgomery, Alabama, where they were president of their school's Gender-Sexuality Alliance. Now entering their sophomore year at Michigan's Wayne State University, they eventually hope to start their own community-based nonprofit. In the meantime, their message for LGBTQ+ individuals and allies is simple: vote.

"Lawmakers need to be able to write laws that reflect different perspectives and different ways of life," says Eris, who emphasizes the importance of electing public officials who are diverse in race, gender, sexuality and ability. "I hope to see in my lifetime a gay president, a nonbinary president, a trans president. ... Those are the people who will consider everyone when they write laws that affect communities."



"I want to be the woman I would have liked to look up to when I was a child."

Jay Jones

Jay Jones

Jay Jones made history in March 2024 when her peers elected her as the first transgender president of the Howard University Student Association, the student government at one of the country's most prestigious historically black colleges and universities.

"HBCUs are places of radical and revolutionary change," Jay says. "This was true during the civil rights movement, and it's true now." She ascended to leadership after participating in the Human Rights Campaign's National HBCU Leadership Summit, during which LGBTQ+ students at HBCUs learn the skills they need to become change makers.

If you ask Jay, her classmates didn't elect her in spite of her gender identity but because of it. "As a Black trans woman, I can empathize with everyone," says Jay, a political science major. "And that means I can think about policy in ways that are inclusive for all groups."

Her commitment to inclusion already has yielded significant fruit for LGBTQ+ students: As the Howard student government's first transgender vice president, Jay ushered passage of the school's new "Pride Policy," which ensures LGBTQ+ sensitivity training for faculty, secures funding for LGBTQ+ student activities and creates a committee to explore covering gender-affirming health care for trans students as part of the university's student health insurance plan.

Her work on behalf of the LGBTQ+ community will continue not only during her term as president, Jay promises, but in her life beyond college. "I do this for all the queer little boys and queer little girls ... who haven't gotten a chance to dance. I want to be the woman I would have liked to look up to when I was a child."

Jay Jones was elected president of the student government at Howard University in Washington, D.C., in March. She's the first trans person to win the office at Howard, one of the nation's most prestigious historically black schools. COURTESY OF JAY JONES