

The Transcendence of Michaela Mendelsohn

How a married man with a wife and three kids transitioned in 2008, became a lesbian-identified woman, an LGBT activist, a public speaker, and recently, a mom—and made the world better for trans youth and trans job searchers.

BY MARCIE BIANCO



Congratulations on becoming one of the first transgender board members of The Trevor Project.

The Trevor Project has an amazing team dedicated to preventing and ending suicide among LGBTQ youth. This includes crisis counseling, education and advocacy. Nearly half of our crisis calls are from trans youth and suicide is at an all time high. My chief mission is to expand our reach to the trans community with an understanding of their unique issues and needs.

Why did you found the California Transgender Workplace Program?

I own a group of restaurants and four years ago we hired our first "out" trans employee. When she told me her story of how she was forced to use the men's room, which resulted in her being molested, I realized how difficult it is for trans people in the workplace. When we put the word out that we were a welcoming place for transgender job seekers, we found many hardworking, talented people were looking for jobs and being turned down because they were trans. Since then, about 8 percent of our employees have been transgender. That first employee is now the general manager of our top restaurant. Having an equal footing in the workplace leads to greater opportunities and broadens the vision of trans people who are trying to survive.

You were a consultant for Laverne Cox's character on *Orange Is the New Black*.

When I met with the creator Jenji Kohan and her writing team, I told them I wanted no compensation or credits for my help. Instead, I asked two things. First, get the character right and not the negative stereotypes which were most often portrayed in Hollywood. Second, hire a trans actress. I knew Jenji was going to do whatever she wanted for her new show. But to her credit she did both, and it turned out great for our community. Laverne is such a good example for others to follow.

Describe your life before transitioning.

When I grew up, the word 'transgender' was not even being used. There was no internet or talk shows to help me understand what I was feeling. In retrospect, there were always signs. I would wear my older sister's clothes in private when I was 7 years old. And my best friend was usually a girl with whom I could better identify. I went through a lifetime of suppression, finding ways to act out my fantasies without my family knowing. I compartmentalized what I was doing so I could get on with my very busy life raising a family, building businesses and participating in various sports. Eventually this did not work any more and a lifetime of suppression caught up with me. I became sick emotionally and physically and had mostly given up on my life until I decided I had to explore my gender issues. Once I did that, most of my symptoms went away. I