Stressing a Point

Recent findings show that trans women are twice as likely to die prematurely compared with their cisgender counterparts.

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Several years ago, I learned that Kelly, a childhood friend of my former husband, had died. Her body was found curled up in a corner of a Philadelphia bus station. Kelly had spent most of her early adolescence living as a transient in the mazelike corridors of the city's bus and rail system known as SEPTA.

When she came out as transgender in her early teens, Kelly didn't fully understand the meaning of the colorful flag she'd unfurled. All she knew was that her family rejected her for the way she talked, looked and acted, ways that felt right and natural to her.

After one of her parents' many putdown sessions about how ashamed she made them feel, Kelly ran away. With nowhere else to go, she made her way to the transportation hub she would come to call home.

There, Kelly tasted a freedom she'd never experienced and grew up on her own. She panhandled for food, clothing and, when the station wasn't an option, shelter.

As the years passed, Kelly became increasingly street smart. She teamed up with another homeless teen, and the two devised a scheme to make money. Kelly would bait men looking for sex, and her partner in crime would rob them. The hustle was good while it lasted, but when word spread in certain circles, Kelly and her accomplice were forced to quit their dangerous con game.

In her 20s, Kelly began having medical problems from untreated anal fissures. Kelly had assiduously avoided doctors ever since the family pediatrician had spoken with her parents about the gender identity she embraced.

Then, she met a man she thought truly cared for her. At first, he paid for medical treatment. Then, he promised to help pay for the gender-affirming hormone treatments she needed. Everything was fine for almost 10 years. Then, one night Kelly's lover brought several strangers to the West Philly apartment they shared. He'd invited them there to have sex with her. After an ugly scene that became disturbingly physical, Kelly felt lucky to exit the apartment with her life.

Her whereabouts remained unknown for almost 15 years, until a brief news item surfaced about

the discovery of the body of an unidentified homeless trans woman in a bus station. It was Kelly; she was just 45 years old.

Kelly’s death illustrates the vulnerability many transgender women face. Indeed, recent findings show that trans women are twice as likely to die prematurely—of either illness or non-natural causes—compared with their cisgender counterparts.

At the risk of sounding simplistic, increased acceptance of trans women in society and access to life-affirming health care might have changed the outcome for Kelly, a woman who died far too soon.

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