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HER JOB

The Trans Mayor of a Texas Small Town



SAMANTHA ALLEN 02.10.17 11:01 PM ET



Jess Herbst was not expecting to become the first openly transgender mayor in Texas—at

least not yet.

But when the previous mayor of the tiny 673-person town of New Hope passed away from a heart attack last May, she had already quietly undergone a year and a half of hormone replacement therapy to transition from male to female. Herbst, a longtime city councilor then going by the name “Jeff,” was appointed to finish Hamm’s term. She faced a crucial choice: Come out or hide.

“I certainly wasn’t going to stop transitioning,” she told The Daily Beast. “That was just not an option. So I really thought that the only thing I could do was to just come out on my own terms to the town and see if I could control the message.”

That message came in the form of a letter to the town—published on the New Hope website at the start of February—in which Herbst declared, “I am transgender.” Several close friends were already familiar with that fact, but the letter made it official.

“I use the name Jess, a simple change from Jeff,” she joked in the message.

Herbst’s story has since attracted international media attention, with outlets from *The New York Times* to the BBC seeking her out for interviews. She doesn’t quite see what all the fuss is about—“I’m just someone who came out as trans in a tiny little town; there’s nothing really special about me,” she told The Daily Beast—and she hopes that the TV crews roaming the streets of New Hope don’t hurt her re-election chances.

But self-deprecate as she might, Herbst’s story is a big deal—not just for LGBT people for whom she represents an important political precedent, but for anyone lingering under the misconception that anti-transgender legislation is a top priority in small-town America.

Indeed, Herbst’s situation might seem paradoxical to some coastal liberals: She lives in a county that favored Trump over Clinton by a 17-point margin—and in a state currently considering an extreme anti-transgender “bathroom bill” known as SB6—and yet she told The Daily Beast that she has had “no negative reactions in person from anyone” since she came out. In fact, Herbst, her wife, and her two daughters, appear to be having a grand old time in New Hope, Texas.

That's not so tough for Herbst to understand, however. A town of New Hope's size has its priorities straight—and while anti-LGBT sentiment can certainly be stoked, it's much further down on that list.

“What we're concerned with here is the neighbors got a car in the front yard on blocks, this house is falling apart, somebody's trying to buy a piece of property that's half an acre in a two-acre minimum [area]—and the neighbors all have two or three or four acres and they don't want somebody coming in on what they consider too small a lot,” she said.

But what about the “bathroom bills” that we're told are being demanded by concerned Texans who want to stop evil restroom predators? Herbst doesn't deny that Republicans in her area might go along with their party on that issue, but having lived in Texas as a closeted transgender woman for many years, she's certain that the demand for those “bathroom bills” on the right comes from the top-down rather than the bottom-up.

“There was no swelling of people from New Hope and Princeton and Melissa and Anna and all these towns saying, ‘Oh my God, we can't let transgenders in the bathroom!’” she told The Daily Beast. “It just doesn't exist.

“But once [Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick] says that,” she continued, “then they're like, ‘Oh well, that's OK, I voted Republican, my pappy voted Republican.’”

Indeed, from Herbst's perspective, the sudden push for bathroom legislation is primarily coming from politicians like Patrick who want to shore up support among their base and from anti-LGBT groups like Focus on the Family—not from regular Americans who are worried about the safety of women and girls, as those politicians and groups might want us to believe.

“They're instilling fear that didn't exist in the first place,” said Herbst. “People are easily manipulated—especially by media. If you show them something and if you repeat the same thing to them over and over again, they'll begin to believe it.”

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Herbst's frustrations echo the feelings of many transgender Americans that the increased visibility of the so-called Transgender Tipping Point in 2014 has given way to a terrifying backlash. It's hard to be excited about increased media exposure for transgender people and well-written transgender television characters when your rights are now under constant attack from state legislatures throughout the country. It's enough to make some transgender people nostalgic for life before the spotlight.

Herbst, for instance, has slowly been living more and more of her life as Jess in North Central Texas without incident for the last decade.

"I've been going to the women's room for 10 years in Dallas, Fort Worth, and McKinney, and I have never even had a second look," she recalled. "I do okay these days but when I first started coming out, it was pretty obvious [that I was transgender], and even then people were kinda like, 'Eh.' It was not something that was bothering them."

To counteract the current fear-driven backlash, Herbst believes that the public needs to hear more stories like hers. Over the past few years, the media has fixated on transgender celebrities like Caitlyn Jenner, who congratulated Herbst last week, and on controversial topics like transitioning children, so it's the everyday stories that tend to get lost in the shuffle—stories of people like Herbst, a Texan who knew she was transgender before she knew the word "transgender," who has been married for 36 years to a supportive spouse, and

who put transition on hold to raise children but finally realized she had no choice but to be herself.

(“It’s like I’m free,” Herbst said her wife told her last weekend. “It’s like *we’re* free.” And her children have become her fiercest defenders.)

In a country with at least 1.4 million transgender adults, there are hundreds of thousands of stories like hers for every transgender model.

“I really think that’s where we are in the transgender movement right now is the realization, by the public that we are just regular people—and that there are plenty of us,” said Herbst.

Once Herbst has survived her 15 minutes in the spotlight, it’s back to the work of being mayor. When asked what was on her agenda going forward, she gave The Daily Beast a long and complicated answer about zoning laws and coding enforcement—not exactly sexy issues but, in New Hope, big ones.

“Being transgender has nothing to do with my job,” she said. “The car on blocks and the house next door are way more important than what I’m wearing.”