

EDUCATION LIFE

A University Recognizes a Third Gender: Neutral

By JULIE SCELFO FEB. 3, 2015

Rocko Gieselman looked like any other undergraduate at the University of Vermont but perhaps a little prettier, with pale freckles dancing across porcelain skin and bright blue eyes amplifying a broad smile. Black bra straps poked out from a faded black tank top emblazoned with the logo of the indie band Rubblebucket; a silver necklace with an anchor dangled over ample décolletage.

Gieselman, a 21-year-old senior majoring in gender studies, was chatting cheerfully from a futon, legs tucked sideways, knees forward. In the tidy, poster-filled apartment that Gieselman shares with a roommate near campus, we were discussing the dating landscape. Gieselman, who came out in seventh grade, blushed and smiled shyly: “My partner was born female, feels female. The partners I’m attracted to are usually feminine people.”

Gieselman, too, was born female, has a gentle disposition, and certainly appears feminine (save for a K. D. Lang cut). But Gieselman self-identifies not as a gay woman but as transgender. Unlike men and women who experience a mismatch between their bodies and their gender identities and take steps to align them, Gieselman accepts having a womanly body, and uses the term — along with “genderqueer” — to mean something else: a distinct third gender.

While a freshman at Burlington High School, Gieselman began feeling that the label “girl,” even “lesbian,” didn’t fit. “Every time someone used ‘she’ or ‘her’ to refer to me, it made this little tick in my head. Kind of nails-on-a-chalkboard is another way you can describe it. It just felt wrong. It was like, ‘Who are you talking to?’”

Being a boy didn’t feel right, either: “I had a couple months where I gave it a go. I tried to bind my chest with an Ace bandage every day. I wore some masculine clothes and told my friends to call me Emmett.”

Neither category applied. “It felt not only like I was invisible but, especially at that time when hormones are aflutter, like no one would really know what I was like for the rest of my life.”

Gieselman began spending time at Outright Vermont, a trans and queer youth center where the gender lexicon of

activists and academe is widely accepted. “As soon as I learned about a genderqueer identity, I was like, ‘Oh! That’s the one!’” said Gieselman, who frequently ends sentences with a gentle laugh. “Before, it had been really difficult to explain how I was feeling to other people, and even really difficult to explain it in my own head. Suddenly, there was a language for it, and that started the journey.”

Gieselman dumped the girlie name bestowed at birth, asked friends and teachers to use Rocko, the tough-sounding nickname friends had come up with, and told people to use “they” instead of “he” or “she.” “They” has become an increasingly popular substitute for “he” or “she” in the transgender community, and the University of Vermont, a public institution of some 12,700 students, has agreed to use it.

While colleges across the country have been grappling with concerns related to students transitioning from one gender to another, Vermont is at the forefront in recognizing the next step in identity politics: the validation of a third gender.

The university allows students like Gieselman to select their own identity — a new first name, regardless of whether they’ve legally changed it, as well as a chosen pronoun — and records these details in the campuswide information system so that professors have the correct terminology at their fingertips.

For years, writers and academics have argued that gender identity is not a male/female binary but a continuum along which any individual may fall, depending on a variety of factors, including anatomy, chromosomes, hormones and feelings. But the dichotomy is so deeply embedded in our culture that even the most radical activists had been focused mainly on expanding the definitions of the two pre-existing categories.

Today, a growing number of students are embracing the idea that when it comes to classifying gender, there should be more than two options — something now afforded by the dating website OkCupid and by Facebook, which last year added a tab for “custom” alongside “male” and “female,” with some 50 options, including “agender,” “androgynous,” “pangender” and “trans person,” as well as an option for controlling who can see the customized version.

Activists on campuses as diverse as Penn State, University at Albany, University of Chicago, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, and University of California, Riverside, are laying claim to a degree of identity freedom nearly unimaginable when the first L.G.B.T student centers were established. Today’s students, who grew up with Gay-Straight Alliances in their high schools, with transgender people represented in the media and with transgender rights percolating through the courts, arrived on campuses already L.G.B.T.-friendly and, in many cases, equipped with gender-neutral housing and bathrooms.

In hopes of raising consciousness of the biases built into social structures and into the language we use to discuss

them, students are organizing identity conferences and inventing new vocabularies, which include pronouns like “ze” and “xe,” and pressing administrations to make changes that validate, in language, the existence of a gender outside the binary.

Certainly, there’s a long line of people throughout history whose traits have put them outside norms, and some cultures long ago formalized the existence of a gender that isn’t purely female or purely male, like the American Indian’s two-spirits or India’s hijras. But the binary is a belief system at least as old as Adam and Eve, and most people don’t even realize it’s there. “It’s like a constant coming-out process, educating those around you that there is a gender binary, and this is what it means to identify outside of it,” said Gieselman, who works on campus planning gender-related events.

Identifying as genderqueer is an opportunity to self-invent, unburdened from social expectations about dress and behavior. Occasionally Gieselman wishes for a lower voice and flatter chest, but other times feels O.K. with, even happy about, having a feminine physique.

“Even within the same day or the next day I can suddenly really love how my chest looks in a sundress,” said Gieselman, who wears two small nose rings. In the bedroom closet hang T-shirts, flannels, dresses and a rack of bow ties.

It might seem a simple turn of events, but adding gender-neutral options to the University of Vermont’s information system took nearly a decade of lobbying, the creation of a task force of students, faculty members and administrators, and six months and \$80,000 in staff time to create a software patch.

One key to the developments is Dorothea Brauer, a plain-spoken, big-hearted mental health counselor known to everyone as Dot. Ms. Brauer spent nine years working at the campus counseling center before becoming, in 2001, the director of what was then called the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning & Ally Center.

While in her 20s and living in New Jersey, Ms. Brauer, who wears her hair cut short with a single, long braid down her back in tribute to a Cherokee grandmother, was spending time with a woman when an acquaintance changed the course of her life by inquiring about the relationship, and then pointedly but nonjudgmentally asking, “Honey, are you gay?”

“I said, ‘Well, yeah, but only with Anita,’ ” recalled Ms. Brauer. (Anita would turn out to be her life partner — 32 years and counting.) “That’s how clueless I was,” she said, chuckling over a taco salad lunch at the Penny Cluse Café in downtown Burlington. “I was 24, 25, and scared to death. I came out to my mother, only my mother, because I became physically ill with depression.”

A decade later, as one of the few out women on campus in the 1990s, she treated students with debilitating identity issues, some of whom attempted suicide or faced a psychotic break. (L.G.B.T.Q. youth are more than twice as likely to

attempt suicide as their heterosexual peers, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.) Ms. Brauer's first act upon being installed as the center's director was to assign a graduate student to research and catalog the unmet needs of the transgender community.

Among the difficulties faced by transgender students: inability to use bathrooms marked "men" or "women" for fear of a confrontation with a confused classmate; being accused of using a stolen student ID in the cafeteria because the name printed on it didn't match someone's gender appearance; and having the faculty rely on a student-information system that listed only legal names, leading to occasions when a student might be embarrassed or inadvertently outed. Ms. Brauer heard about one distraught transgender freshman whose professor, while calling roll, first read the student's feminine legal name, then announced the male nickname.

Ms. Brauer reached out to the registrar, Keith P. Williams, who worked with the university's lawyers to allow transgender students to change their first name in the schoolwide system, but doing so required an in-person visit to the dean of students' office and filling out paperwork. She then set to work waging a campaign to educate, face to face, members of the faculty, staff and administration on why language sensitivity was so important to a student's self-respect — and assisted students in getting school policy amended to specifically prohibit discrimination based on gender identity.

By 2009, faculty members themselves began pushing for a broader solution to the identification issue, and Mr. Williams created a task force to look into how students could register a preferred first name without having to make a special request. The task force realized that the only way to guarantee a professor would properly refer to a student was to supply the student's pronoun on class rosters and advisee lists. Then came the question of which gender-neutral pronoun to offer.

"Students proposed 'they/them' pronouns, but the faculty vetoed the idea because they said it is grammatically incorrect," Mr. Williams recalled. "They said, 'You don't put a plural pronoun with a single individual.'" A second option, also being used in various trans communities, was "ze" (pronounced ZEE), a riff on the German pronoun "sie," with "hir" replacing "his/her."

Bowing to the faculty, the task force selected "ze" and revised its information system, becoming the first school in the nation at which students could select their pronoun. They could also leave the field blank, or opt for "name only," indicating a preference for being referred to by name instead of by pronoun.

The change fueled gender-awareness campaigns by students all over the country. So many administrators were receiving requests that, in 2012, the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers convened a task force to draft a list of best practices for handling transgender student records.

So far, about 100 schools now allow students, and sometimes employees, to indicate a moniker other than their legal first name, according to the Consortium of Higher Education L.G.B.T Resource Professionals, and hundreds more have contacted Vermont on how to implement the pronoun choice.

In September, the university's pronoun options were expanded yet again to include "they," as grammarians have reminded naysayers that the English language is constantly evolving. Since 2009, 1,891 University of Vermont students have specified a preferred pronoun, with 14 opting for "ze," 10 for "they" and another 228 for name only.

On campuses across the country gender-conscious students have adopted the earnest, P.C. practice of starting social interactions by introducing themselves by name and "P.G.P.," or preferred gender pronoun. (The most semantically obsessed still object to the word "preferred.")

Robyn Ochs, an educator who helped found an early L.G.B.T. faculty and staff group at Harvard, believes that Vermont's changes are nothing less than lifesaving.

"Some people try to reduce this whole topic to kids trying to be cool or they're just acting out or whatever, just trying to be different or new," said Ms. Ochs, who has visited some 500 campuses to speak on L.G.B.T. issues, and often facilitates a discussion she calls "Beyond Binaries." "But there have always been people who have felt profoundly uncomfortable in their assigned gender roles," she said. "Anything we can do to make them safer, or make them feel recognized, heard, seen, understood, we should do. To validate their identity and experience could, in fact, save their life."

How does one explain to family members what it means to be neither male nor female? Once, at age 15, in conversation with an aunt at the kitchen table, Gieselman tried unsuccessfully to diagram the concepts of gender and sex on a napkin, with gender referring to the attitudes and behaviors a society associates with a person's biological sex, and sex referring to a person's biological status (not to be confused with sexual orientation, one's romantic interests). "I don't even know what it was I was trying to show," Gieselman, an eighth-generation Vermonter, recounted with a laugh. Gieselman's grandmother, too, had a few questions about the napkin. "They were very confused," Gieselman said, "and still are."

Sara Miller, Gieselman's mother, said that when her teenager first came out to her and offered to provide a pronoun chart for reference, she scoffed.

"At the time, it irritated me to no end," said Ms. Miller, a social worker. "I was like, 'Really? This is what our struggle is going to be about? Pronouns?'"

But Ms. Miller has learned to accept the person her former little girl has become. "It's grown out of the process of really seeing how Rocko has grown as an individual and an adult, seeing how Rocko is their own person, and not a child,"

Ms. Miller said. “This is how they presents themselves to new friends and colleagues and employers and students. That group knows Rocko only that way.”

Although Ms. Miller tries her best to always use “they/them” pronouns, she often slips up, but Gieselman isn’t bothered. “Rocko and I have an understanding. She knows I try,” said Ms. Miller, slipping up again.

At last summer’s orientation for new faculty members, Ms. Brauer handed out pocket-size pronoun charts created by the L.G.B.T. Resource Center at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. She also gave out her cellphone number and words of support: “If you’re struggling with it, give me a call any time and I’ll walk you through it, and give you time to practice, and walk you through any questions you might have.”

Use of “they/them” is so widely accepted in the politically correct enclave that is Burlington that a colleague at Feldman’s Bagels, where Gieselman works part time, recently asked if it was O.K. to correct a customer who uses the wrong pronoun because she knew Gieselman wouldn’t.

“I know if something might be bothering them, they wouldn’t necessarily say something about it,” said Alexa Ciecierski, a morning-shift co-worker.

At the apartment that afternoon, Gieselman talked excitedly about finally receiving documentation of a legal name change, which arrived in the mail that afternoon, and showed off several gig posters brought home by a roommate, who manages local bands. On the coffee table, a collection of Angel Cards filled a small bowl, each billet offering a single word like “discernment” or “balance” or “integrity,” meant to be chosen and read for a daily dose of inspiration.

“Do you want to pick one?” Gieselman asked me. I reached in the bowl and pulled out “strength.”

Gieselman leaned forward off the futon, swished the cards around, plucked one from the center, smiled, then read it aloud: “Freedom.”

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