

# BOSTON PRIDE GUIDE

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Credit: Marilyn Humphries.

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## Mission Statement

Boston Pride produces events and activities to achieve inclusivity, equality, respect, and awareness in Greater Boston and beyond. Fostering diversity, unity, visibility, and dignity, we educate, communicate, and advocate by building and strengthening community connections.

## Vision Statement

Boston Pride creates change and progress in society by embracing our community's diverse history, culture, and identities, promoting community engagement and inclusivity, and striving for visibility and respect in unity.

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An



Opener

The I in LGBTQIA  
doesn't stand for Invisible

By Kimberly Zieselman



[T]oday, more intersex people, especially intersex youth, are breaking through the isolation and shame and speaking out proudly about their bodies and experiences.

Intersex – the I in LGBTQIA – is an umbrella term for people born with a combination of biological traits that are not strictly ‘male’ or ‘female’. As common as red hair, nearly two percent of the population is born with reproductive or sexual anatomy and/or a chromosomal pattern that does not seem to fit the typical male/female binary notion of sex. For example an intersex person like myself could be born with XY, or typically ‘male’, sex chromosomes, internal testes, and no uterus but have typically female genitals and secondary sex characteristics. This is a trait referred to as ‘androgen insensitivity’. Or a person may have typically ‘female’ XX chromosomes and internal reproductive organs but have external genitals that are perceived

to be atypical, such as an enlarged clitoris. Intersex people are not really that rare; they have just been mostly invisible.

One reason many people have not heard of intersex traits is that they are not widely discussed. Doctors have problematically attempted to surgically erase us. Intersex is often discovered at birth or during adolescence. Since the 1950s, intersex children in the United States have been routinely subjected to irreversible, harmful, and unnecessary surgeries and other medical interventions in an attempt to ‘normalize’ or ‘fix’ their bodies. But intersex bodies aren’t broken; rather, what harms them are so-called normalization surgeries, which Sharon E. Preves’ research has shown can result in loss of genital sensation and sexual function,

sterility, scarring, ongoing pain, incontinence, loss of reproductive capacity, depression, and PTSD for many intersex individuals.

The families of these youth are often told to keep these experiences a secret, sometimes even from the children themselves. Sometimes doctors did not fully inform the parents or the children about the procedures that they performed. Until recently, doctors believed that early surgical intervention and concealment would help the child develop a 'normal' gender identity. Most young people born with intersex traits still do not receive long-term follow-up after surgery and to date very few studies have been conducted to evaluate this treatment.

Parents of children with intersex traits still find themselves pressured by medical personnel to make a crucially important, irreversible, and medically unnecessary decision for their child when the child is too young to participate in the decision making process. As opposed to providing families with adequate mental health care to process the situation, children with intersex traits are pathologized by much of the medical community and the decision to perform early and irreversible genital surgery is presented as a medical necessity due to society's generalized discomfort around the diverse array of natural human bodies.

Often the parents are presented with the option to operate when the child is very young and has no medical need for surgery, even though cosmetic surgeries could just as easily be performed later, when the child is able to participate in the decision.

Since the 1990s, intersex adults around the world have been stepping forward to speak out against the medical treatment that they received in childhood. Many also disclosed that the secrecy surrounding their experiences led to traumatizing feelings of shame and stigma, and had a profound negative impact on their lives. Leaders of the adult intersex community, like sociology professor Georgiann Davis in her book *Contesting Intersex: The Dubious Diagnosis* (2015), have called for an end to unnecessary surgeries, and for children with intersex traits to have a voice in the treatment of their own bodies.

Today, interACT, a national organization based in the Greater Boston area, is the only organization fighting to promote legal and human rights of intersex youth as well as working to raise awareness of intersex issues in the media and empowering intersex youth advocates. Some of interACT Youth's recent projects include a viral BuzzFeed video entitled, "What it's like to be intersex", as well as consulting with MTV to create the first intersex main character on

interACT Youth member Amanda Saenz on the set of MTV's *Faking It* in February 2016. Amanda is the first intersex person to play an intersex person on TV.  
Credit: Courtesy interACT.





Ryan, interACT member, attends Creating Change in Chicago, 2016.  
Credit: Courtesy interACT.

the popular teen show *Faking It!* Readers can find both these videos on YouTube.

interACT also uses innovative advocacy strategies on the state, federal, and international levels to impact law and policy in favor of intersex rights. Recently, interACT co-sponsored an international intersex human rights forum with the Arcus Foundation at Creating Change.

The LGBTQA community and intersex global rights movement are battling some of the same societal constraints associated with not fitting into narrow understandings about bodies and identities. Most intersex people share the common experiences of discrimination, stigma, and shame based on non-binary notions of sex, gender, and sexual orientation. Many intersex people struggle with sexuality and feelings of abnormality, which are perpetrated by doctors' framing of intersex as a 'disorder'. Although intersex is not a sexual orientation, it can be an important identity that some have reclaimed and celebrated in the face of medical providers who have felt intersex is shameful and should be kept hidden.

While the fight for bodily autonomy and acceptance is a continuing battle, today more intersex people around the world, especially intersex youth, are breaking through the isolation and shame and speaking out proudly about their bodies and experiences.

Invisible no more! ●



*Kimberly Zieselman, JD, is an intersex activist and Executive Director of interACT (www.interACTadvocates.org). Kimberly lives in Sudbury, Massachusetts.*



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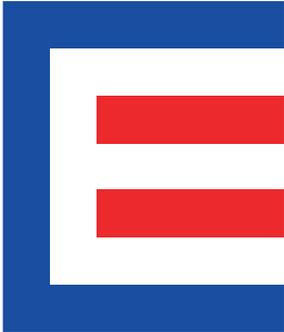
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