

Parents Group Fighting New Anti-Trans Laws

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‘It is painful to have your child rejected’: the parents group fighting new anti-trans laws



Jose and Lizette Trujillo with their son in Tucson, Arizona. Photograph: Cassidy Araiza/The Guardian
As more Republican states target trans youth, a group of parents meet to push back on discriminatory legislation, share stories and celebrate

Katelyn Burns

The faces of two clearly exhausted adults appear on a screen at the front of the room. They wish to be identified only as parents from [Texas](#).

“I don’t know what I look like on your end,” the mother says, “but I know I look like death on my end, so it can’t be good on the Zoom screen.”

Her description of her appearance matches the mood in the room at the Human Rights Campaign headquarters in Washington DC where about two dozen parents of trans kids sit in a large semicircle. They’re here for an annual weekend of meetings organized by [HRC Parents for Trans Equality Council \(PTEC\)](#), a group organized to give a voice to parents of trans kids in advocating to the media and elected representatives. Tonight’s meeting couldn’t have been better timed.

I was there on 11 March to listen in on a roundtable. This was right as the Florida legislature was passing the [“don’t say gay” bill](#) and the Texas governor, Greg Abbott, was [moving to classify gender-affirming care](#) for trans minors as child abuse. Across the country, more than [300 anti-LGBTQ+ bills have been filed this legislative year](#), according to HRC. Most of them target transgender children, a

demographic not even old enough to vote against the politicians setting policy.



People protest in front of Florida state senator Ileana Garcia’s office over the ‘don’t say gay’ bill in Miami on 9 March.

Photograph: Joe Raedle/Getty Images

A few weeks after the PTEC gathering, Alabama passed a series of bills that [essentially make it illegal to be a trans minor](#) in the state. I doubt it will be the last state to do so since this has become the de facto big issue for the US conservative movement – and Democrats seem reluctant to fight back too forcefully.

The woman on the screen goes on to explain her attorney advised her not to publicly advocate for herself or her trans child, and that her family took down all outward displays of support for LGBTQ+ people, like the Pride flag outside their home. “It feels really bad to hear from people across the country that we just need to leave Texas because our experience here is not what we experience in the legislature,” she says. “We have an affirming community, [and] we don’t experience discrimination in a way that so many people do in other states and in other areas of Texas.”

Balancing raising their families while also advocating on behalf of their children’s lives is weighing heavily on all these parents. Jose Trujillo, father of a trans boy in [Arizona](#), speaks about how he sacrificed to become a naturalized citizen so that his kids could have freedoms that he didn’t have before becoming a citizen.



But now, he lives in a state that introduced more anti-trans bills than any other in the country. “I felt what it feels like to not be sort of an outcast,” he tells the roundtable. “I’m thinking when I have my children and they’re born in this soil, they’re gonna have a completely different experience. And then I see this happening and it just makes me angry.”

Over the phone days later Jose’s wife, Lizette, told me their 14-year-old son had what she called a “typical” transgender childhood. Early on, she gendered her kid a lot, pushing pink and princesses, but her child instantly rejected it. She remembers a friend of her kid, then age eight, running up and asking: “Hey can he and I go play in the soccer field?”

Jose and Lizette Trujillo’s son in Tucson, Arizona, in April.
Photograph: Cassidy Araiza/The Guardian

“The friend’s mom corrected her son. And the friend looked at us and said, ‘No, he’s a he, can we go play?’” Lizette recalled. That interaction prompted her to broach the topic with her child, who told her that in his heart he is a boy. “From that moment on, we supported him,” she said.

Initially they were met with resistance from some family and friends. A close friend of hers warned against telling anyone about her son's gender identity, for fear that someone might call Child Protective Services. It took eight months for Lizette to find a support group to help start working through it all. Thankfully, her son's school was supportive and had experience with other trans children, wiping a big worry out of Lizette's mind.

She cut some family members out of their lives to protect her son, though many have eventually come around. "It was really painful to have your child, this person that you would give your life for, to have them rejected by people who are supposed to love them," she said. "I took that very hard, very personally. Why wouldn't you love him?"

Another parent, Stephen Chukumba, from New Jersey, is one of the most vocal of the group. "I have a trans son and I'm really upset that in 2022, three months in, six transgender people have already been killed, and states are actively moving to further marginalize transgender people as if we are some huge threat," he said, his voice ringing with emotion. "It doesn't seem that enough people are taking what's happening to us seriously, and it bothers me, it angers me, it upsets me and it frightens me."

A week later, over Zoom, Chukumba, a widower and single father, told me gender wasn't a big deal in his household. All four of his kids – boys ages 20, 18, 15 and 12 – have long dreadlocks and have always dressed in fairly gender non-descript ways. His 15-year-old, who Chukumba didn't want to name for privacy reasons, came out as trans five years ago.

Chukumba said that it was often easier to take the kids to Osh Kosh B'Gosh and buy them all T-shirts and slacks, including his trans son before he transitioned. As a result Chukumba would find himself correcting strangers who often perceived all of his kids were boys. His trans son later told him that he didn't mind being called one of the boys.

"Thinking back to it, he never, ever corrected people," Chukumba said. "He would just go along with it."

He recalled a moment from about a year ago when his son's identity finally clicked for him. His son knocked on Chukumba's bedroom door and asked to come in. "I'm like, 'What do you want?'" he recalled. "He just kept staring at me and a little smile crept across his face and literally in that moment was the first time I saw my son. Like I saw just the dude. I didn't see the assignment at birth."

It was a critical moment for Chukumba. He realized then that he needed to start preparing the teenager for life as a Black man. He said he'd always told his cisgender sons to do push-ups around the house, so he he started to include his

trans son. He also realized he had never taught the trans teen to dap up – greeting one another with a fist bump.

“No child of mine is not going to know how to dap up another brother,” he said. “I had been derelict in my responsibility in raising a Black male child not showing him how to be appropriate in situations with other Black men.”

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Stephen Chukumba

At the PTEC meeting , Chukumba provides the emotional backbone of the evening’s discussion. “It’s quickly becoming apparent that there is no safe space for us, and how is that tenable?” he asks late in the discussion, his voice crackling as he begins to cry. “I’m already dealing with intersectionality with a Black trans child and now I have to think about what states can you live in. I will have to accept that somebody could decide that you represent something that they hate and that’s it.”

As I’m packing up my things after the roundtable ends, a group of parents asks me to join them for dinner. We laugh and talk over Italian food in downtown DC, which feels like a respite from the hostile world outside. Shortly after the appetizers, one of the parents stands up, phone in hand. “The judge enjoined the Texas action!” he yells, referring to a decision by a local judge in Texas to put Abbott’s child abuse order on hold.

Cheers go up in our section, and tears are shed. After an evening of long, hard, emotional testimony by a group of loving parents who feel beaten but not defeated, it was a much needed victory.

Chukumba had perhaps best articulated earlier in the evening the fight that lies ahead for both trans people and the parents who love us. “With the last sinew in our body, with the last breath, we will fight to make sure our children have a place in the society where they can stand with their heads held high, not afraid, knowing they’re entitled to the same rights and liberties that everybody else has in this world,” he said. “I just refuse to allow this s**t to go down without a fight.”