

[HEALTH AND WELLNESS](#)

LGBTQ Issues

Add Topic +

Transgender rights are under attack. But trans people 'just want to thrive and survive.'

**David Oliver**

USA TODAY

Published 8:13 a.m. ET Nov. 14, 2023 | Updated 9:30 a.m. ET Nov. 14, 2023

Distilling a community down to one word is nearly impossible. But when it comes to the trans community, many agree one word feels appropriate: resilient.

Hundreds of anti-LGBTQ and specifically anti-trans pieces of legislation are being introduced and passed throughout the country, accompanied by incidents this year that suggest shifting attitudes toward trans people writ large, including TikTok star Dylan Mulvaney, who received backlash after Bud Light announced it would feature her on cans and sponsor her videos. Keep in mind that transgender adults make up less than 2% of the U.S. population; about 5% of young adults identify as transgender or nonbinary.

Despite all of the above, transgender activists on the local level continue to fight fiercely for their communities – and truly want the same treatment as everyone else. The Human Rights Campaign Foundation regularly champions and supports these advocates.

"We owe it to our ancestors to live proud, to be visible, to ensure that we are fighting for the very rights that they fought for us," says trans activist Brayland Brown ahead of Transgender Awareness Week and Transgender Day of Remembrance, "in fighting for their lives that no one else has to experience the things that they have experienced, but also we can triumph in those successes, in those victories that they had while they were alive, to continue to build on that momentum to propel us forward."

Being trans is 'magic'

Andrea Montanez, the senior racial equity, LGBTQ + and immigration organizer for Hope Community Center in Florida, credits the trans community's resilience with what she calls "magic."

Montanez talks about the trans community at length over a Zoom call with several activists, including Brown, who've participated in Human Rights Campaign programs. "We are really so special," she adds, emphasizing trans people's strength amid adversity.

Don't confuse "special" with wanting special treatment, however. "I put my pants on every day just like you," says Ahmea Pacheco-Branch, community engagement coordinator for the Philadelphia Department of Public Health division of HIV Health. ✕

That quest for equal treatment proves more difficult in some states than others. Activists like Montanez and Brown are fighting for trans rights in Florida. While Brown knows that he could relocate from the state – a privilege he has – he knows he's needed.

"What makes me stay here in the state is that if I leave, who else is going to fight?" the co-founder/co-director of The Smile Trust, an international nonprofit working to fight against housing injustice and address food insecurities. says.

In Philadelphia, Pacheco-Branch is fighting for better health care treatment than she received when she was diagnosed with HIV. She tested positive in June 2018 and couldn't access medication until that September.

"I had already accepted the status, but I had not accepted that people in a health care field could be so careless with a body," she says.

She doesn't want to put her energy into educating people about HIV; if they don't know, it's because they don't want to know, she says. She also isn't interested in anyone's pity party – she just wants to be a pillar of support for her community. Doing that cements investment in herself and her trans peers: "I will die on the hill for people with HIV. I will die on the hill for my trans girls. Why? Because I know what has been in store and has been in place for me. I have always been the underdog. I have always been the girl that you will count out. I have always been the scapegoat. I have flipped that on people."

In case you missed: Gender-affirming care is life-saving, research says. Why is it so controversial?

Where 'trans joy' comes from

The LGBTQ+ community – and the trans community specifically – typically finds joy amid trauma.

Zahara Bassett wants other trans folks to know that you never have to give up on yourself: "Your journey does not define what your future looks like," says the president/CEO of social services and advocacy organization Life is Work. "It only makes you stronger."

Of course there is reason to be upset and frustrated: In 2023 alone, at least 25 trans and gender non-conforming people have been killed, according to the HRC. Pacheco-Branch turns her frustrations into joyful moments: "My trans girl joy usually comes out when someone is being disrespectful. Because again, it is where you try to push me in the dirt that makes me shine even more. So being able to shine my light unapologetically, I walk down the street and who I am, I got this raspy voice for a reason, somebody's grandmother does, somebody's auntie has some chin hair. So for me, I'm a woman every single day. So that's what brings me joy."

Montanez notes the importance of trans people of all ages seeing each other: It's good for youth to see older trans people alive and active.

"Joy is (being) alive together," she says.

Brown, like the other activists, was grateful to work with the HRC and other Black, trans masculine activists – and the opportunity to be visible.

"We can disappear into the world and continue to live in the shadows," he says. "But ultimately, that's not how it's supposed to be." He referenced Montanez's term: magic.

"Having that opportunity to share that magic and spread that magic is key to making sure that everybody understands that we just want to thrive and survive like everyone else," he says.

'I've kept her safe': Families flee states with transgender care bans to protect their children