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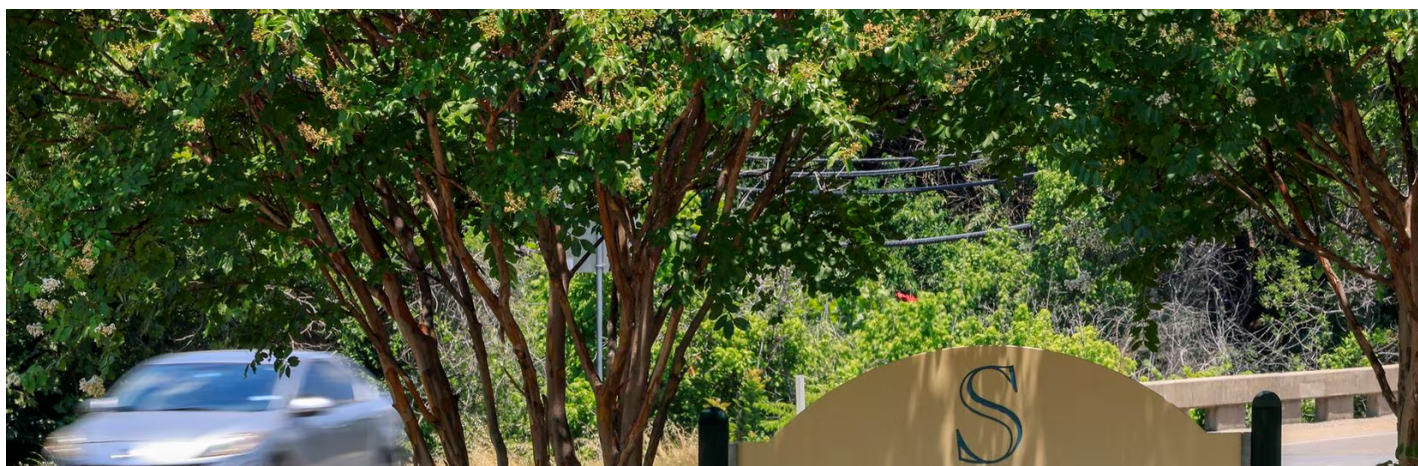
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Why was a transgender Texas boy removed from a lead role in the school musical 'Oklahoma'?

The student had been cast to perform a male part in a Sherman High School production





A sign welcomes people to Sherman. (Elias Valverde II / Staff Photographer)

By [Talia Richman](#)
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Max Hightower was cast in ensemble roles for theater productions throughout high school. Then, finally, his teacher offered him one of the lead spots in *Oklahoma!*.

He would play Ali Hakim in the classic Rodgers and Hammerstein musical — and even get his own song, “[It’s a Scandal! It’s a Outrage!](#)”

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Max tried to act like a seasoned professional in front of his teacher. But as soon as the ecstatic 17-year-old left the office and told his friends about his role, they all started screaming in excitement.

“Everybody in the choir room, like, blew up,” Max said.

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Max threw himself into preparing for the part. He read the script during class, managing to go off-book in three days. But last week, Max’s dad Phillip Hightower got a call from Sherman High School principal Scott Johnston. School officials were taking away his part.

Johnston said that the school enacted a new policy that “only male actors can play male roles, and only female actors can play female roles,” Phillip Hightower recalled. The principal told him that meant Max would no longer be playing the role he’d been cast in.

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Max is transgender, and the character of Ali Hakim is a man.

A Sherman ISD spokeswoman declined in an email to make officials available for an interview. The district released a [statement this week](#) saying the production of *Oklahoma!* contains mature adult themes, profane language and sexual content. School board President Brad Morgan directed all media requests to the spokeswoman.

“Unfortunately, all aspects of the production need to be reviewed, including content, stage production/props, and casting to ensure that the production is appropriate for the high school stage,” it read. “There is no policy on how students are assigned to roles. As it relates to this particular production, the sex of the role as identified in the script will be used when casting.”

The decision forced high schoolers in Sherman — about 70 miles north of Dallas — to confront the nationwide backlash against LGBTQ rights. Texas lawmakers in recent legislative sessions have debated policies that target transgender students, from which [bathrooms they can use](#) to which [sports teams they can play on](#). The state [recently banned gender-affirming care](#), including medication and surgery, for minors.

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Max said that after learning he'd lost the part, he was so upset that he could barely speak.

“I think the only word I said was, ‘Why?’” he said.

For Max, the school's move has threatened a space that he and his friends rely on to be inclusive. Other theater students got similar news, and the district pushed the show back at least until mid-January.

“I like being in theater because I get to be with people that are like me, because there's a lot of trans people and LGBTQ people in theater. It allows me to express myself,” Max said. “Theater has been ours.”

Max Hightower before a school dance. (Courtesy of Max Hightower)

Backlash in Sherman

Amy Hightower, Max's mother, was devastated when she found out about the school's decision.

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Max has been Max for years, but not everyone in the Hightowers' orbit knows that he's transgender. Amy Hightower hasn't shared it broadly; the family lives in a conservative community.

But the school's actions changed things for her. She decided to post about what happened on Facebook — and to make her post public.

“I don't normally post super personal stuff out here on the ol' FB but today I am. Until you have a kid that comes to you and tells you they don't want to live anymore because they're different, don't tell me what you would do,” she wrote. “We almost lost this kid, more than once, and now we just support Max and what makes Max happy.”

She said she poured her heart out online because her family has gotten to a place with Max where he's able to thrive. What helped him, she said, was his parents' support.

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The mother didn't want that being ripped away by a “hateful decision.”

Other parents of theater students are also speaking out for their children. Betty Price found out late on Friday that her daughters were also impacted by the school's

decisions. CJ, a senior, had been cast to play a minor character named Sam.

CJ wasn't bothered about getting cast in a male role. She was just excited to be able to perform *Oklahoma!* with her friends. In addition to acting, she was helping build the set.

"And now I can't be a part of it anymore?" CJ said. "Just because I was put in a role that didn't match my gender assigned at birth?"

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The Prices and other theater families are trying to figure out what to do next. A school board meeting is scheduled for next week.

"They messed with the wrong group," CJ said. "One thing about theater kids, we're not silent. We act, but we don't play."

Kayla Brooks and Liz Banks have immersed their 15-year-old daughter Ellis in the arts her whole life. When she got involved in school theater, her parents said the bright and beautiful girl blossomed even more. She was cast in a male role for *Oklahoma!* — in part, the family said, because there weren't enough boys in the theater program. They were devastated that she lost her role.

"We wish this wasn't a thing," Brooks said. "That we didn't have to fight these

battles for our kids, that they could just go to school and be who they are and explore their passions and learn and grow and have a safe space to celebrate their artistry.”

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In a statement, Sherman ISD officials said they are “working diligently to produce *Oklahoma!* as a musical that is appropriate for the high school stage.”

Max still wants to be a part of it. But if the school says he has to play a female role?

“Then,” he said, “I’ll do tech.”

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