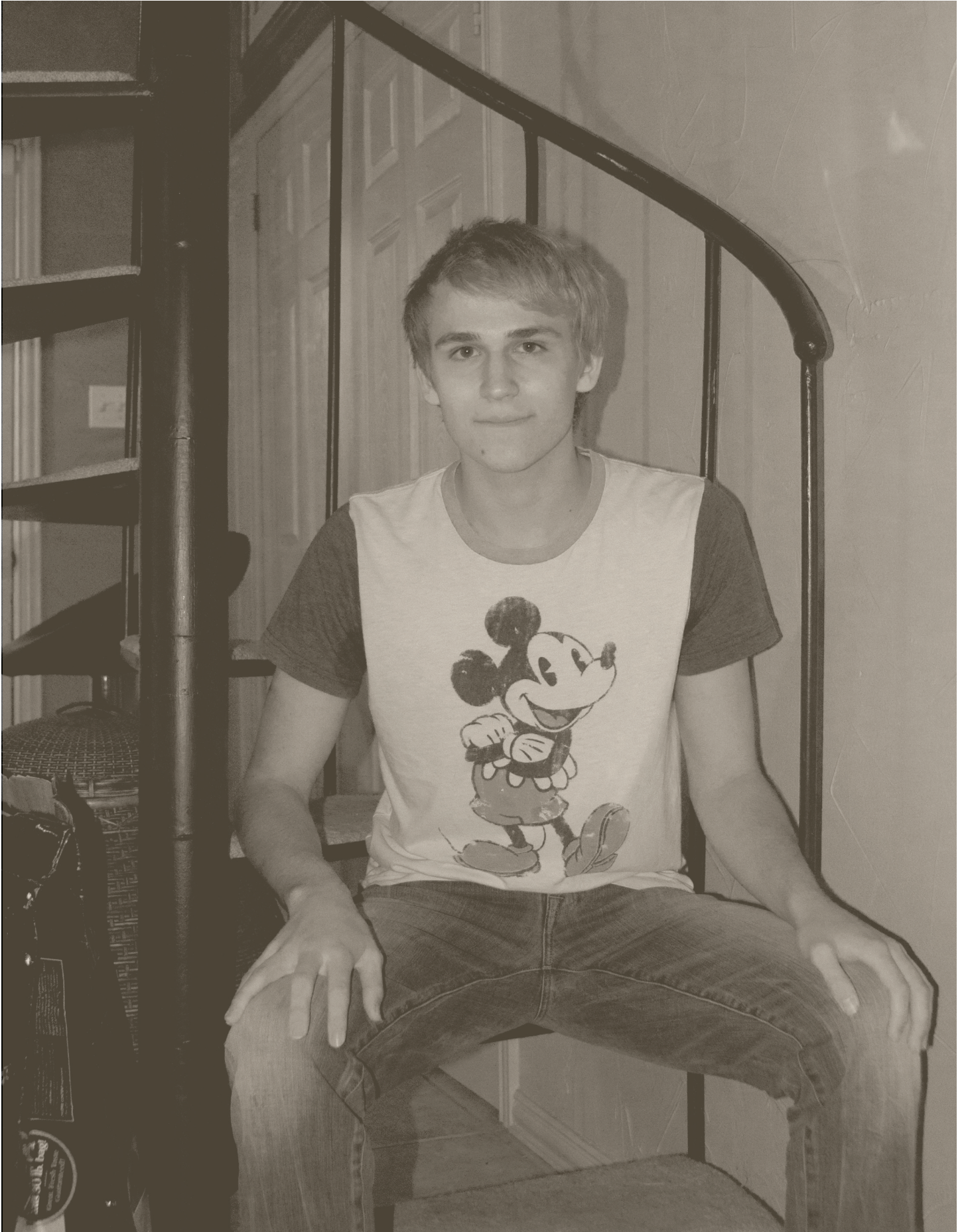


A NEW SELF Riley Cole, 17, went through life as something they were not, but now they can see their own place in life. They are gender-neutral.



I'M RILEY

For years, there were no words to describe it. And at an all-boys school, it wasn't always easy to articulate. But inconspicuously placed in a senior yearbook blurb, Riley Cole '17 found the words: 'I am gender-neutral.'

HOW BI GAY

As an eight-year-old, something was different. It happened during one of Carol Rice's second grade creative writing assignments.

While the rest of the class dreamt up worlds filled with Marvel superheroes, all-star athletes and *Star Wars* characters, one student wrote about Riley.

Riley wasn't like the masculine heroes who lived in the pages of the other kids' stories. Riley wasn't a boy or a girl.

And while the student didn't know it at the time, Riley held something about themselves, something about their identity and something about their name that describes who they are today.

Riley Cole '17, previously Zachary, identifies as gender-neutral or gender non-binary—a gender identification that takes “they/ them/ themself” pronouns.

“I identify as a gender-neutral person,” Riley said, “meaning I fully claim my male sex, I don't have any feelings that I don't fit in my own body. I also don't claim the definitions of man and woman.”

For Riley, the discrepancy between gender (how Riley identifies) and sex (the gender Riley was assigned to) was the root cause of their gender-neutral identity.

“Because of my sexuality,” Riley said, “I'm not straight, therefore my brain anatomy is more similar to a heterosexual woman's. In my head, gender and sex may not match. I'm sexually a male because of my body and as for gender, which is more of a perception of yourself, I actually have brain anatomy that isn't the same as a cisgender male—meaning agreeing with their sex.”

As a student at the school, Riley got the sense that the issue wasn't

something to be heavily discussed at a single-gender school.

“At St. Mark's, it was, ‘I just shouldn't talk about it all the time,’ and ‘Let people think what they think,’” Riley said. “There isn't as much fear as a lot of people feel. Because of the all boys environment, it is really hard for people to express how they feel, how they identify. It was easier for me to quietly be who I [wanted] to be.”

However, Riley remains grateful for the experience they had at St. Mark's—an experience with little physical bullying.

“I know St. Mark's is really great,” Riley said. “We don't have a lot of physical bullying or anything like that. There were times when I got the miniature version of physical bullying with older kids, when I was in Middle School, with high school kids and that was really weird. In High School, nobody cared again.”

But when Riley would leave school to go home, the conversations Riley would have with their family regarding gender identity weren't always easy, and the experience of having those conversations was something the family found hard to accurately remember.

“[My mother would tell me], ‘That's wrong, that's not who you are,’ as anyone does when they're raising a kid and it's not what they expected,” Riley said. “It did make me sad, but at the same time, it further rooted me in my conviction to be this person.”

By contrast, Riley's mother, Barta Cole, remembers the conversations she had with Riley more positively.

“It's never really been an issue for me at all in any way, shape or form,” Barta said. “I'm his mom, and I love him, and I just want him to feel comfortable. It's been very easy. It's not something we really talk about, because Zach is who he is, and he's an amazing young man, and so it really doesn't matter to me.”

Ultimately, for Riley's sister,

Melissa Cole, the conversations the family had about gender identity were never shunned as a topic of conversation, which she ultimately believes helped Riley throughout their transition.

“[Barta] never disowned [Riley],” Melissa said. “She never said, ‘That's it, we're not talking about this,’ and a lot of times it was an open conversation. A lot of times it was mom, or even me, just trying to do the best we can to help [Riley] get to his identity, but keeping his mental health intact, because that's the most important thing to us.”

And although Riley now identifies as “they/ them Riley,” Riley doesn't expect the same identification from Barta and Melissa.

“Part of the reason why I don't ask my family to address me differently [is] because it's out of love,” Riley said. “It's not about the fact that they don't care. I know who I am, and it's not teaching people about gender neutrality,” Riley said.

Now, having graduated Riley reckons with their experience at the school, particularly with the school's message about manhood and leadership.

A topic Riley brought up in their senior blurb.

“There is a point of an all-boys school,” Riley said, “and right now it needs to be teaching these males how to be good people, and St. Mark's has the emphasis on strong male leadership.”

But ultimately, Riley recognizes the principles of leadership that the school attempts to instill as integral parts of the whole-person education.

“These values are so important,” Riley said. “The reason I'm at the top of my class [at USC] is because I went to St. Mark's, and I learned the ethics and values to be in a top position. My strong person isn't a masculine, path-to-manhood leader. It's something else, with the same values, the same universals.”

Story: Kamal Mamdani, Sahit Dendekuri, Mark Tao