



Living true: Eli Okrey is 'very happy' in transition

By Ross Forman

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Eli Okrey doesn't know his plans yet for Pride Sunday (June 24) in Chicago, when the city will seemingly turn into one oversized rainbow flag. He is excited and happy to celebrate, but admittedly is very scared, too.

Okrey transitioned earlier this year, coming out on Facebook the day after top surgery.

"My entire life I've been very disassociated with myself," Okrey said. "As a kid, I always felt like a guy (and) never knew anything about gender-identity or trans people until I was in my 20s. I was raised in a very fundamentalist, gender-rolled, and controlled household. I used to wish I was born a male and always wanted short hair, but just figured that everyone was that way, which is quite comical and transparent.

"I never fit into the female world and really struggled with being incredibly awkward until well into my 20s. The first place I felt like I sort of fit in was when I played (football) for the Chicago Force. Everyone saw me as a masculine lesbian, which is an accepted niche in our society. I had always dressed pretty masculine, but 2013 was the first year I started to shop in the men's sections in stores. That was a huge step for me and quite a confidence-booster.

"Through all of the changes, though, I still remained disassociated with myself and couldn't peg what was off."

Two years ago, Okrey finally started to feel the anxiety of being gendered as female, he said.

So, in December 2016, Okrey started experimenting with changing his name.

Then last summer, Okrey made it official, asking close friends to use male pronouns.

This past January, "I decided to stop toe-dipping and really face myself and my fears for the first time ever. I realized that, at (age) 30, an unauthentic life lived is not a life lived at all."

Still, Okrey admitted, "I had a lot to lose, mainly my parents and siblings, but (I) knew that, regardless, my life is only mine and I needed to figure this out, whatever the outcome; I knew I had to find the truth. Since then I have been part of trans masculine groups, and been going to a specialized psychologist at the University of Minnesota ...(and) things started to fall into place."

Okrey, 31, is a server/bartender at Buffalo Wild Wings. After spending the past 10 years living in Chicago, Okrey now lives in Minneapolis. He is dating Jessica Lutke, a nurse in the Chicago area.

Okrey now identifies as, queer.

"Discovering my gender identity and sexual orientation has been quite a long journey," Okrey said. "I originally identified as mostly a lesbian, dating my first girlfriend in 2012. Since I now understand my gender identity so much better, queer is the best

label that fits.

"I now am very happy. Learning to be happy even in so many uncertain conditions is something I've been working on for some time now and I would say the vast majority of my time I am very happy."

Okrey played strong safety and outside linebacker for the Force, a women's tackle football team that disbanded after the 2017 season. He played for the team's final six seasons.

Football impacted his life off the field too, for sure. The team was instrumental in developing Okrey the player and the person.

"(The Force) taught me many things, (such as the fact) that I can push myself physically and mentally harder than I would have ever known. It also taught me the value of good leadership and what it means to be a team player," Okrey said. "In this particular journey, I would say I got to know myself much better and faster because of the intensity of the sport, and the high goals we had set as a team. It taught me to strive for and do your best regardless of the situation."

Okrey's first year with the Force, 2012, also was the first time, "I ever realized I wanted top surgery," he said. "My chest never felt right or looked right to me. This realization was completely separate from any sort of thoughts about my gender. I just knew I wanted to have a masculine chest and be able to go (shirtless) freely."

Okrey had top surgery last month.

"I cannot even begin to explain how absolutely incredible it feels to finally look in the mirror and begin to see myself," he said. "I am still recovering, but cannot wait to hit the gym."

Okrey admitted that the support he's received has varied, though mostly very positive.

"My older sister Melissa and sister-in-law Haley have been amazing in their support of me for my whole life, and now is no different. They have given me love, a place to live, and helped with stability in a way that I've never had before in my life," Okrey said. "Where I am today is in large part due to their support. S is my younger sibling, and has been amazing and on the sidelines for me with a listening ear for many years to help me sort out so many of my thoughts. My other siblings (Katelyn, Rachel, Stephen, and Laura) have also been very supportive, which makes me very happy. I also have nieces and nephews who are some of my biggest fans. They are so much fun to have around and had absolutely no problem switching pronouns for me. My grandma Billie is incredible, too. She is way beyond her time and has been wonderfully supportive. Even last summer when I wasn't even out to myself yet, she teasingly asked me, 'Is that a mustache I see growing there?' It was her way of letting me know she saw me and loved me, even though we hadn't talked about anything yet.

"I've had some family members who politically are polar opposite from me who have come out in support, which fill my heart with surprise and joy. My parents currently do not support me, in public or private. It is very hard for me, but something I understand is out of my control. They are good people and I hope they come around some day, but right now fundamentalist dogma is holding them back.

"Last, but not least, my girlfriend, Jessica. Last summer she was one of the first friends I asked to start using male pronouns. She did and her support since has been invaluable. She never judges me, always has time for me, and has given me unconditional love in a way I've never experienced. She is truly a pure soul."

Okrey has always valued truth and tried to live that way in everything. That includes being truthful with himself.

"I started on a low dose of testosterone in March, so I'm still early in that phase, but very excited to see some of the changes that will be coming," he said. "As recently as a month ago I never felt the need to come out publicly, but as time went on, I realized it would be better for me to rip the Band-Aid off and make it known to anyone who cared.

"I have many dreams and desires for how I want my life to be. Life has been getting better in the past year and I know it will only be continue in that direction. I still have many things to figure out, such as a long-term vocation, and when I will be able to live with my girlfriend instead of doing long-distance, which is tough. But I feel more encouraged and excited than I ever have that I will be able to achieve my best life now that I've begun to live fully authentic. Transitioning is a huge, life-changing thing that I have been needing in my life for its entirety."

TRULY SPEAKING WITH ...Eli Okrey

Favorite Sport (besides football): Baseball

Favorite Pro Team: Chicago Cubs

Favorite Pro Athlete: Javier Baez

Favorite Chicago Sports Team: Cubs

Favorite Chicago Restaurant: [Geja's Cafe](#)

Favorite Chicago Bars: O'Callaghan's, Spyners and Luckys

Favorite Movie: Iron Man

Celebrity You'd Like to Meet: Robert Downey, Jr.

Favorite Pizza Toppings: Green peppers, mushrooms and sausage

Favorite TV Show: Shameless

Goals For The Next 5 Years: "To get a motorcycle and my pilot's license. I'd also like to travel."

(Complete the sentence): Even my close friends will be surprised to know ... "That I was homeschooled through high school."