Victim Witness Statement

I have been a member and organizer of the transgender community for 15 years, ever since my partner of 17 years transitioned female-to-male. In that time, even though I specialize in working with transgender elders, the vast majority of the deaths of transgender people I personally know have been from either suicide (like my first partner) or, like Chanel Larkin, murder.

The impact of hate crimes on the transgender community is beyond most people’s understanding. These are rightly called “message crimes,” and they send a message to everyone who is like the victim that they could be next, that they are hated so much there are people who would rather become a murderer than see them live.

The following was not written by me, and it isn’t even about Chanel’s death. It was written by a really vibrant, sweet, mature (50+) community activist who was devastated by a news article about the murder of another young transgender woman much like Chanel who lived states away. I have her permission to use it for public education, because I think it would be hard to be more eloquent or explicit about how hate crimes corrode people’s lives:

“Last night I read about this [murder] just as I was leaving to have dinner with a lesbian couple who have been together some 20 years. It was a long drive and several times I forgot that I was actually driving somewhere, I couldn’t stop crying.

I told them the news, we managed to switch it off and I had the most fun evening with us playing Hawaiian songs on our ukuleles and then I headed home. The thoughts returned and I cried myself to sleep. This news haunts me and I’m having difficulty understanding how this could be.

It is strange, because on one level it is just more news of something happening that is bad, and then I remember the nights when I was scared to go out, the days when I was scared to go out. I remember going to dinner with several gay friends of mine who looked so incredibly straight and yet a car passed by as we entered the restaurant and they screamed profanities about faggots at us.

I remember loading a gun and placing it on my nightstand at night and then unloading it and locking it up during the day. I’m not normally paranoid but there have been times I was worried because I was living in my same old neighborhood and everyone knew [I was transgender].

Then came the years of being in a new church. I’d started out stealth and it seemed to be working. But I felt I was still working on dealing with who I am and slowly I opened up to people. Over the last six years I have become quite comfortable and have spent considerable time and effort to break those barriers of fear to be open about who I am with the hope I can help change some people’s thinking.

But this news brings back the fears from childhood, when I only knew I was different and afraid to tell anyone I was different because I knew I would be killed; a heavy burden for a child who did not even understand. In later years doing Reiki healing, these feelings and flashbacks to those times of thought returned to me and I thought I’d been dealing with it.

Last night as I returned home from my friends, I checked all around the neighborhood before I got out of my car. I thought, oh no, will I return to living like this? I cried myself to sleep thinking about this young
woman who was murdered, wishing I could have transitioned at an early age like her. As I cried myself to sleep, I connected and knew her spirit to be beautiful and to know she is now in good hands.

I think [another listserv member] said it best: God cries when something like this happens.

While I went through my own fears last night, going back and forth wondering how I can be so affected by this happening to someone I don’t even know and feeling so traumatized and, on the other hand, knowing it’s more important than ever to say yes be careful but to also not back down. I can only try to change people’s thoughts about people like us, one by one, but it must continue. Change must continue, we are the children of the spirit as is everyone and good must prevail.”

I am personally not concerned about how long Chanel’s killer remains in jail, although on behalf of my community, I will worry when he’s released. What I am mostly concerned about instead is that your sentence and your statements help send the message that all lives are worthwhile, and that hate, homophobia, and transphobia have no place in a civilized society.