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In Chester, A Transgender Reporter Covers A Transgender Debate

By [HOWARD WEISS-TISMAN \(/PEOPLE/HOWARD-WEISS-TISMAN\)](/PEOPLE/HOWARD-WEISS-TISMAN) • SEP 2, 2016

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Neil Allen, left, editor of *The Message for the Week*, a weekly paper out of Chester, talks with writer Ruthie Douglas. Allen, who is transitioning, recently covered a debate in Chester about bathroom use for transgender students.



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3:16

A reporter who recently came out as transgender had to cover a transgender issue when the local high school found itself in the center of a national debate over the rights of students who want to use the bathroom of their choice.

Earlier this year, Green Mountain Union High School in Chester held public meetings to discuss its transgender bathroom policies.

The New York Times even wrote about the tiny high school (http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/18/us/national-debate-over-transgender-bathrooms-turns-personal-at-rural-vermont-high-school.html?_r=0) in Vermont that was dealing with some very big issues.

Neil Allen was writing for a local paper, *The Message for the Week* (<http://www.themessage.news/>), when he covered the story.

Allen is transgender, and he says he began thinking about making the transition about a year ago.

When North Carolina passed a law this year that requires people to use the bathroom that corresponds with the gender listed on their birth certificate, Allen wrote an editorial attacking the law.

And that's where he came out as transgender.

"We're out in the public. Everybody knows who you are," Allen says. "If you're in the local newspaper, everybody knows who you are."

Soon after that, he stopped writing under the name Nancy Cavanaugh, and changed his byline to Neil P. Allen.

Then the story in Chester broke.

"And, you know what, I was out at that point, so people knew I was transgender," he says. "So a transgender person reporting on a transgender topic; some would say, 'What better person?' But then others would say, 'The worst person ever.' Because it is a such a hot bed item."

And it got hot at Green Mountain Union High School.

Some students and parents protested when the administration said transgender students could use the bathroom of their choice.

"A transgender person reporting on a transgender topic; some would say, 'What better person?' But then others would say, 'The worst person ever.' Because it is a such a hot bed item." - Neil Allen, journalist

At about the same time, President Obama issued a national directive on the rights of transgender students to use the bathroom of their choice.

All of this was going on as Allen was living his first few weeks, out in the public, with a new name.

He says it was a challenge as a journalist, because he was pulling for the transgender students.

And in the end, when the Chester students were allowed to continue using the bathroom of their choice, Allen shared in their victory.

"Sitting there, covering the story, it was difficult," Allen says. "But I was so proud of those kids. The kids who stood up and said, 'Transgender kids should be able to use the bathroom of their choice.' They were so brave to be able to stand up and say, 'This is what's right.'"

Allen's in the very early stages of transitioning. He hasn't started hormone therapy yet. Any surgeries he elects to do will cost money and take time, so the transition is moving forward, but slowly.

And beyond the Chester town line, the issue isn't going away.

Just this month, a federal judge in Texas blocked President Obama's directive to allow transgender students in public schools to use the bathroom of their choice.

And here in Vermont, a policy that supports transgender students caused an uproar in Chittenden County as the new school year got underway.

So, Allen says, he'll keep covering the story.