

Announcer:

In this episode of Tim Talk, we discuss how to create a welcoming environment for gender transitioning adults with Samantha Paradis, family nurse practitioner.

Tim Dentry:

Thank you for joining us for Tim talk. I'm Tim Dentry, president and CEO of Northern Light Health. I am so glad that you were tuned in because together through meaningful dialogue, we can work to break down barriers, embrace diversity and focus on issues of racial, social and medical justice within our health system and the broader communities that we serve. Today we have a very special guest to help us talk about the T and LGBTQ+. Samantha Paradis is a family nurse practitioner in Fort Fairfield who is working to help create a more welcoming environment for transgender citizens. Thank you for joining me here today, Samantha.

Samantha Paradis:

Thank you so much for having me.

Tim Dentry:

Samantha. I'd like to start this conversation by asking this same question to you as I have of your colleagues who have recently joined us on Tim Talk and as someone who identifies as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, what can you share about your experiences as both a consumer of healthcare and as a professional working in the healthcare sector? Because you have both of those responsibilities and talents, if you will. But before you answer, I just want to step back a second and a couple of things. One is I felt so uncomfortable to be honest by saying LGBTQ+ community as if it's one community. So maybe give the listeners a greater sense of what does it mean by the transgender community or what does transgender mean to you? Or another way to make it more understandable to our listeners that maybe do not have an understanding.

Tim Dentry:

So that's something I'd like you to think about. I also want to make an admission in previous Tim Talks. I felt that I had a lot to learn from my colleagues. Just like I've already learned a lot from you, Samantha, when we talked last week and I'm going to, I know, learn even more from you right now today but in the other colleagues that I spoke with, I felt like I well, had a basic understanding of the issues of bias and the need for greater equality for people of color and gays and lesbians. But I admit that I have less of an understanding of my transgender colleagues and I want to understand more. Would you give our listeners a frame of reference and so that we can start with that, so people really have a greater feel for what we're talking about.

Samantha Paradis:

Absolutely. So I identify personally as non-binary, which is an identity that is within the transgender community and transgender is used to describe people whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. And so for me, I was assigned female at birth but I identify more non-binary gender queer. I don't feel like I fit in that identity that was assigned to me. And so in regards to that, I choose to use the pronouns, they them, although folks within the transgender community choose different pronouns that fit them, they, them, he, her, she, his and there may be a number of different ways that even people within the transgender community identify themselves. Trans male to female, as

they're transitioning from one identification, they're assigned male at birth, they're transitioning to identify as female but not all transgender folks will transition.

Samantha Paradis:

For myself, I'm comfortable and feel well in the presentation that I have. I don't take gender affirming hormones and I've not had gender affirming surgery because I feel like my body fits who I am. It's more of not fitting into the binary that I was assigned to at birth. And so that's a little bit about me and my identity. It has been new for me in that I first identified as queer and still do as far as my sexual orientation. And so sexual orientation differs from gender identity. And sometimes that's confusing for folks because I can use to identify both my gender and my sexual orientation.

Samantha Paradis:

And for me, it just means that I'm outside of this cultural norm, both in my sexual orientation and my gender orientation or my gender identity. And so when I first identified as queer, being out and sharing that with my family members and people becoming comfortable with it, that was the process for me. And now with my gender identity, non-binary gender queer. It still is a process of telling family members please use they, them when you refer to me. Most people are meaning well but they may not have any idea that when I share this with them, it means that they should make an immediate change and how they refer to me because it's so ingrained in our minds, that gender is a binary.

Tim Dentry:

That is very enlightening. And you touched on points that I did not understand and now you put it in such a way that I think all of us can really gain from that. So thank you. Thank you for that. So my first question then is, again, let me just repeat the experiences, both a consumer of healthcare and as a professional working in the healthcare sector. So, now that people have a clear understanding of who Samantha is, we want to listen to you. I want everyone to understand as a provider of care and as a consumer of healthcare, what have your experience has been?

Samantha Paradis:

So my experience has been there's even within our systems, it's sometimes hard to identify what we would like as preferred pronouns or what we would like as our gender markers, whether it's in the EMR or in our licenses, through the State of Maine or other identifications that are really important to be able to live and work. And so it's been great to see some of those changes happening over the last few years. To think about. Now, I think in Maine there is an option for non-binary folks on the license and we're hoping to change our EMR. So these things are changing, they're coming and it's really great. And then individually as my own self, having to learn how important pronouns are, I don't always get it right either. And being able to have that humility when I'm interacting with patients, family members, friends and saying, you're changing your pronoun and I want to respect that. And I plan on doing that but I may not get it right all the time but if I don't get it right, I will correct myself and work on making that better.

Tim Dentry:

Thank you. That's really excellent. And I love those words, being able to have that humility and you know what, that's one of my big lessons learned thus far in opening up these kinds of dialogues is, I find myself leaning on my own sense of humility even more so because if you lean the opposite direction, you'll build a wall, you'll create a wall, you'll create a gap, you'll create friction, you create unspoken kinds of things, maybe spoken that's a slippery slope, right?

Samantha Paradis:

Absolutely. And especially for people who identify as transgender and that even coming to access care, there are so many obstacles in getting into the door. Whether it's their insurance company is not recognizing their chosen gender or something didn't get billed correctly because now they are listed as male but they're having what typically would see as female screenings done. So there are a lot of obstacles just from the get go for patients who identify as transgender. And so if we can say, I want to be able to provide the best care for you and sometimes I'll need your help to correct me or I will correct myself. And I'll also do research in order to be able to provide the best care for you.

Tim Dentry:

And this is much of your work that you're doing right now within Northern Light, right?

Samantha Paradis:

Yeah. So I do provide primary care for transgender folks. I don't prescribe hormones typically because we have a partner in our community through main family planning where I will send patients to their office for the gender affirming hormones. But I do provide an office environment that's welcoming for transgender folks, or at least try to create that environment. And it's really great to meet people within our community in such a rural community to see the LGBTQ community that's really thriving and it's great to be a part of it. Before COVID, I had been planning on organizing a pride in Arisa County and now there are still gatherings, locally and connections with you through the Boys and Girls Club. So it's really great to see all of this happening.

Tim Dentry:

I can only imagine that a patient that walks into your office for the first time, perhaps the first time that they are taking that first step in their journey and everything that they probably have been struggling with, et cetera, coming to terms with and they want to... They're so hopeful that they're going to be placing their care, their life, their identity into the hands of a caregiver that can really care and really give. And I can only imagine that when they walk in and they experience working with you as the caregiver, it must be just the most wonderful thing that's happened in that person's life.

Tim Dentry:

So I just want to see what you think about that but I also just want to thank you from the deepest part of my heart, that we talk about having a culture of caring and really making sure that the experience is good and we have primary care access and all these things I talk about all day long but that connection for what is really important to the patient that we don't pre-determine what's important to a patient but so they're walking in and they're being cared by you. And what's that moment like?

Samantha Paradis:

Yeah, I've had several meetups with new patients recently because I've become known in the community as a member of the transgender community and a provider. And it's hard to describe it's almost as though we're both being seen for the first time in a healthcare environment for who we are. And that's an important part of ensuring equitable LGBTQ care is making sure that people are seen for who they are. Meeting folks and using their chosen name, not using their dead name, which is a term that we use for a name that somebody is no longer using that they were assigned to by their parent at birth or whatever it was. But we don't use the dead name, even though it's listed sometimes on the

chart because it can't be changed unless they've changed their insurance or they've gone through all of this process.

Samantha Paradis:

And so that dead name may still be listed on their chart. And sometimes MAs will go into the waiting room and use that name because it's what's listed on the chart. And so if a transgender person is scheduled with me the day of, in the morning during huddle, we'll check in with the MAs and say, "Please use the patient's chosen name, which is listed in parentheses." And also we talk about their preferred pronouns. So those two simple things show so much respect and humanity for the person that we're seeing, that it means that we can open up a door to much more of what they need for their care.

Tim Dentry:

Thank you. That's great. My question number two. So I consider myself a well-meaning person. I consider myself very open minded. I consider myself an ally and absolutely want to use this pulpit, if you will, that I'm in as CEO of this complex health system, to reinforce our love for one another equally, everywhere and every aspect of that. And I'm also human and I also make mistakes. And I'm also humble, like I said, so as this well-meaning ally, how can I work to use the correct pronouns for folks and use gender neutral and inclusive language?

Samantha Paradis:

Yeah. It's not easy because it requires change. And what I've talked to, even my mom about is practicing. So practicing using the gender neutral pronoun, they, when you visualize the person who uses that pronoun, it might be especially useful right before a you're about to see the person. And then what I'd got in the practice of doing was using the gender pronoun they, which is neutral when I meet someone new before they've told me what they identify as, whether they identify as male, female, transgender, non-binary. So I try to use the gender neutral term, they and in reference to someone else when I first am meeting them before I know what their chosen pronouns are. And then when address, seeing a group of people using pronouns, you have a gender neutral language for groups of people, such as siblings, rather than brother or sisters and then friends, folks, y'all rather than guys, ladies, ma'am or sir.

Samantha Paradis:

And so, so many times people are referring to me as ma'am, I mean, countless times throughout the day and I sometimes will correct people but it, after a while it's tiring to say after every response, actually I don't use ma'am. I would prefer you didn't call me ma'am, in order to avoid that entirely. If we can get away from using gender specific terms, that would be helpful for the LGBTQ community. And then in describing someone that you were wanting to address, like if you were in a room, I know we're not in rooms civic now with COVID but using descriptive language, if you don't know the person's gender pronouns, such as, can you give this paper to the person across the room with a white t-shirt and short brown hair? So rather than saying, can you give this to the woman sitting at that table over there? Because we can make an assumption about a person's gender so quickly but what they present and what we assume are not always matched with how the person is identifying.

Tim Dentry:

Very good. Thank you so much. That is good to talk with you this-

Samantha Paradis:

Absolutely.

Tim Dentry:

... And gain a deeper understanding myself and hopefully our listeners have gained as well. So Samantha, what would you like to ask me?

Samantha Paradis:

Yeah, I'm wondering Tim, what are ways we can improve our work and care environments that you see? So that members of the trans community may feel more comfortable working here in accessing care within our healthcare system.

Tim Dentry:

Yeah. Thank you. I think there's really two basic components of that answer. Number one is really show a constant for all people. So we had our equality, inclusion and justice committee meeting and it was really fabulous. And so we had a whole Zoom wall and we had all sorts of different perspectives and identities, et cetera. And we're saying, "Okay, this is what we stand for. We stand for inclusivity and social justice and medical justice, racial justice now so back it up and prove it, what are we going to do?" And it's not a flip of the switch and we are going to do it but total solution won't be there tomorrow. So part of this is, it's a long journey that we're on right now but my promise is that every day we're going to be working on this and talking about it.

Tim Dentry:

So that's number one. And we need to show that it's an inclusive effort. So it truly is all individuals within Northern Light. And so we don't want anyone to feel excluded, devalued whatsoever. We want everyone to feel valued. So the way we talk about therefore particular groups and identities and communities, et cetera, is first let's set that stage and let's set the stage of what we're doing on right now. Let's talk, let's understand, let's have a mutual understanding. So it's okay to talk about this because nobody knows or has all the answers of how this is going to be best done. So then though try to heighten specific awareness, that's why I'm so glad others suggested that you would be part of this podcast and that we would have this talk because we're just starting therefore I guarantee you, if hopefully a thousand or more people will listen to this podcast but they're going to be the wiser because of that, more the wiser because of that.

Tim Dentry:

So we need to heighten awareness. We need to talk about things that we normally do not talk about. And furthermore, so we have a lot to learn along those lines and we're going to come up with ways to, what does that mean, heightened awareness? What is the community that is the transgender community is within Northern Light family? What are the kinds of things that we need to do better, listen better, show better, demonstrate better, reinforce better, all of that? So that movement is underway of open dialogue. The other thing though is clinical equality and I'm really excited about that, that the medical equity point of view across the country, there are all sorts of studies and things but everyone is now talking about that. I was just on a call. We have a clinical affiliation with Massachusetts General Hospital.

Tim Dentry:

I was on that call this morning, we were talking about clinical equality issues and what they are doing about it. And a lot of the studies that they're doing in research, and we said, "We want to be part of all of that. Let's learn what mass general is learning." So therefore convey those lessons learned in a better way to engage and a better way to provide openness for our colleagues here in the transgender community. And that it's only our colleagues, our staff colleagues but it's also those we care for. So hopefully that will be something for you as a provider to the transgender community, that it would be something that they will be able to benefit from as well.

Samantha Paradis:

Thank you so much for that answer. And it leads pretty easily into my next question about how can Northern Light Health partner with community organizations? So I'm really great grateful that we're partnering with larger organizations like Mass General but locally also within the state of Maine, I know Maine TransNet is an organization that's community based, led by trans the gender people for transgender people, providing peer to peer group support and social and community events. And I'm wondering what are ways that we can partner with organizations with our State to ensure that we are connecting with people within the trans community?

Tim Dentry:

Yeah. Great question. And I'll give you some examples and then I'll get back to your specific question on Maine TransNet. I believe that as we take these kinds of public positions and as we increase our transparency on these dialogues and discussions and what we're doing that more organic partnerships and alliances and that thing come up. And two I can cite. One is from the public side, the State Department of Health and Human Services, I've already started the conversation with them because they knew that we were starting this movement here. And they said, "Wow, Tim you're the health system that's been more proactive on this. Everyone has a letter that's gone out but who's taking action as a result?" And so medical justice is a big thing for them. And so can we work together?

Tim Dentry:

And so that's one. Second is we are part of the Maine Justice Foundation and I've been asked to serve on the advisory committee and there are 21 corporations or 21 entities that are represented. And we are... The goal is to provide funding for individuals and organizations that are trying to make a difference in racial justice in the State of Maine. So that organically came up and the connection with Northern Light organically came up because we are saying, "This is what we stand for." So therefore getting back to Maine TransNet, I offer you on the air right now, the opportunity to help make that link. You send to me more background information, what it means, what you'd like to see, what kind of services we could partner on? And I'll make sure I hand that to the right person in our leadership teams, that will be on point and responsible for that.

Samantha Paradis:

That's amazing. I'm so grateful to be working for Northern Light Health. And I know I've said this before but it's amazing to see that folks have a voice and that you are listening and that you're not only listening, you're taking the next steps to back what you're saying, to make change over the long term. So you're making immediate change by hosting these podcasts. So people can hear about members of different communities that they may not be a part of. And then following that up with, how can we take next steps? And I actually, I have a meeting set up to meet with Quinn, the executive director of Maine TransNet later this week because we're friends, the trans community is small.

Samantha Paradis:

So I reached out to them before talking with you to ask what is... You had had a specific question about how many people are accessing gender affirming surgery in Maine and Quinn wasn't exactly sure but stated that now it's been harder to find providers that are accepting Maine Care for people who identify as transgender and need care. And so that's been the biggest obstacle recently is finding providers for patients that accept their Maine Care insurance. But yeah, more to come on that. And I'm so glad that we were able to have that discussion about local connections. I really think it's great that you are a part of the, is it Maine Justice?

Tim Dentry:

Maine Justice Fund, yeah. Racial, excuse me Racial Justice Fund in Maine. Yes.

Samantha Paradis:

That's amazing. Thank you for doing that.

Tim Dentry:

Absolutely. And thanks for that example. You know what think about that if we do organically connect and partner that way, and they're individuals that do not know how they're going to access such unique and specialized and rare obviously, services from an access point of view and then we can help make that happen because we've joined forces. Isn't that why we all chose to go and help care in the first place?

Samantha Paradis:

Absolutely. And these conversations are just opening the door for folks within our Northern Light community to connect with each other and even folks in the outside community. It's that initial, we're talking about this and want to hear more, it really is helping to create that one welcoming and caring environment that we are committed to.

Tim Dentry:

So, Samantha, thank you. I feel like I have a new colleague, new friend and new understanding but I'm just starting. Thank you for joining me here to continue the conversation.

Samantha Paradis:

Thank you so much for having me. I really appreciate it. And I'd be happy to if anybody had any questions, if they're listening into this podcast and they wanted to email me, I'd be happy to follow up with folks after this.

Tim Dentry:

That's terrific. That's terrific. And also thank you to our podcast listeners, Samantha, once again, thank you from the bottom of my heart. Until next time I'm Tim Dentry encouraging you to listen and act to promote our culture of caring, diversity and inclusion. Thank you.

Announcer:

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