In Allegheny County, any transgender person seeking to legally change their name and gender marker schedules a hearing with Judge Christine Ward. Once a month she conducts a closed-door court ceremony where each person gets to come forward with their family or support persons and be legally recognized for the first time as the person they already know themselves to be. These ceremonies are highly emotional; they feel more akin to a wedding ceremony than to a bureaucratic process.

I know this because I am the mother of a transgender teenager. As such, I have spent years interfacing between doctors, therapists, lawyers, and my son in order to reach this defining moment where he, too, could stand in front of this judge.

That day at the courthouse, we watched as several other trans folks were called to the judge’s bench, and we anxiously awaited our turn. My son was called up last, and I walked with him. The judge told him that there was a processing issue with his paperwork and that we would need to wait until the next ceremony. Being a mother of a trans kid means that I have seen my kid in a significant amount of pain: the pain of transphobia, bullying, and exclusion. But I have never seen him experience such raw devastation as I did on that day.

For the first time since he was a little kid, he sobbed on my shoulder; the kind of uncontrollable sobbing that broke my heart. He is now bigger than me, so I stood in front of the judge’s bench, trying to bear the weight of my son’s body along with his heavy sadness. We walked out of the courtroom deflated. This must have been palpable throughout the courtroom because the judge walked out to the hallway and put her arms around my son, and told us, through her own tears, that she was going to fix this, she couldn’t turn him away. And she did; the clerks and the judge and the law interns who were around scrambled for an hour or so and then called us back into the courtroom, and in an after-hours ceremony that was just our family, my son was legally recognized for the first time as male and granted his chosen name.

On October 21, President Trump issued a memo proposing to redefine gender or gender identity based exclusively on sex assigned at birth. This redefinition has a very specific purpose: to make gender markers unchangeable for federal administrative purposes. While it is not within the administration’s purview to dismantle the processes of a county court, the motivation behind the memo is the suppression or eradication of trans identity. As such, we should see it as the first concrete step in a political agenda that would seek to rob trans folks of the legal recognition that my son was afforded in the courtroom that day. This is nothing short of a crisis for the trans community.

Official recognition and validation are significant; it signals to trans folks that they are a meaningful and valued part of our society. Conversely, refusing such recognition signals that the state will not protect trans people, emboldening those who would commit transphobic acts of violence against them. We cannot stand by and let this recognition be stripped away.

This is nothing short of a crisis for the trans community.

Jessie Sage is co-host of the Peepshow Podcast, which addresses issues related to sex and social justice. Her column Peepshow is exclusive to City Paper. Follow her on Twitter @peep_cast.

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In Episode 31 of The Peepshow Podcast, we talk to Julian Gill-Peterson, University of Pittsburgh Assistant Professor and author of Histories of the Transgender Child. While the trans community is reeling from President Trump’s Memo, Gill-Peterson offers a historical perspective, one that comes from the archival work that they have done for the book on the history of transgender children in the 20th century. And this history is important in such a fraught political climate. In Gill-Peterson's words, “Having trans history available is, now more than ever, something that can provide context, but also a different kind of reassurance: you are not the first person to go through this, and our community has experienced this before.”

In regards to this particular Memo, Gill-Peterson’s archival work is important because it points to a rich history of trans folks that cannot be erased. Indeed, they say, “For all the power the government has, it doesn’t have the power to define people’s existence. You cannot make trans people go away because in fact they are not created out of language, they are human beings that exist in the world.”

For more, listen to Peepshow Podcast, Episode 31 peepshowpodcast.com/peepshow-podcast-episode-31

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