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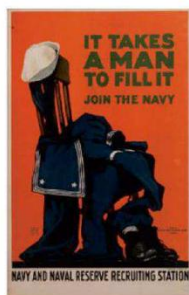
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**Preview:**  
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**September Annex Auction**

Monday, September 16th; 9 am  
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# San Francisco Chronicle

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## 'I WANT TO EXIST'



Frankie Leigh, left, and Skye Michelle, house leaders of the nonbinary cabin, display a Pride flag in June at Color Splash Out camp in North Texas. Campers and counselors were goofing around after enjoying after-dinner nachos at the LGBTQ camp.

Photos by Salgu Wissmath/San Antonio Express-News

For three days during a summer retreat in Texas, LGBTQ children could unapologetically be themselves

By Erin Allday

The girl traveled to summer camp with two friends from Austin, giggling and singing and cracking jokes on the drive up Interstate 35. She was the oldest, at 14, and the tallest, so she claimed the front seat of the Prius. • It was a four-hour trip, and every few miles the kids saw billboards for a Christian advice line, so the girl created an anonymous Google Voice number and they prank-called over and over. Once they tried to convince the person who answered that he was gay. Another time they asked for tips for a gender reveal party. • For the last call, one of the other kids pretended to be a parent worrying over a gay son. The person on the phone offered a prayer, then said there was "no hope" for the child. • It was the girl's first time back in Texas in nearly a year. Her family had left in September after the state outlawed gender-affirming care for transgender youth like herself, even threatening to remove children from their parents if they received treatment.

Camp continues on A15



Director Adora Ysaguirre, center, gets a big goodbye hug from several campers on the last morning as they headed home in June. This summer's campers ranged in age from 11 to 19.

## Tesla cameras helping solve crimes

Police seek footage from bystander cars that capture video

By Rachel Swan

A Canadian tourist was visiting Oakland recently when he had to talk someone out of taking his Tesla from a hotel parking lot. This was no thief. It was the Oakland Police Department. Turns out, the Tesla may have witnessed a homicide.

In Oakland and beyond, police called to crime scenes are increasingly looking for more than bullet casings and fingerprints. They're scanning for Teslas parked nearby, hoping their unique outward-facing cameras captured key evidence. And, the Chronicle has found, they're even resorting to obtaining warrants to tow the

*Cameras continues on A13*

## 'Legacy' admits seek to prohibit practice

By Nanette Asimov

Two letters from Yale University reached the Callcott family home in San Mateo on the same spring day in 2020. One revealed there would be no place for Sophie Callcott at the Ivy League campus that fall. The other asked her dad, a Yale graduate, for money.

"We burned both letters in the fire pit," laughed Callcott, now 22.

It was a question of expectations.

"My dad had gone to Yale as an undergraduate, and I got re-

*Schools continues on A12*





Photos by Salgu Wissmath/San Antonio Express-News

Campers, from left, Alex, 14, Ollie Valdez-Ortiz, 18, Triston Moya, 16, and Rob Belton, 17, swim in the lake at Color Splash Out on June 19 in North Texas.

## CAMP

From page A1

She'd come back to attend Color Splash Out, among the few LGBTQ summer camps in Texas, and one of the few places in the state where she believed she wouldn't have to be afraid.

The camp changes its location every year as a safety precaution. The camp staff had removed Pride flags from the entrance, in case the rainbow banners could be seen from the road and give them away.

"I've realized there are a bunch of people who are basically out to get me at this point," the girl said.

When her family lived in Austin, she worried about people finding out she was transgender. "What if they're a raging transphobe? What if they want to kill me?" she'd ask herself. "That's ridiculous to be thinking that as a child."

But for three days in June, on a 25-acre campus on the edge of a lake, the girl and 28 other campers didn't have to worry about what restroom to use, who might comment on their clothes or their body, or which adults were safe to talk to.

They could carelessly, unapologetically, be themselves.

### DAY ONE

The girl, who is being identified as Emma in this story, got to camp at 9 a.m. Monday and dumped her duffel bag in a corner before signing in. The rest of the campers arrived in clusters, clutching suitcases and pillows and stuffed animals, mumbling goodbyes to their parents. The youngest was 11, the oldest 19.

(Emma's parents worried that publishing her real name would put her safety at risk. The Chronicle is allowing the use of a pseudonym so she could tell her story.)



Camp director Adora Ysaguirre, wearing a Pride flag as a cape, talks with Leo Hernandez, 14, during the camp's welcome event.

At first, the kids stuck with those they already knew. Emma, willowy with straight blond hair cut chin length, chatted with the Austin friends she'd arrived with.

Sitting against a wall and cradling a stuffed toy was Rain, 17, an artist and aspiring filmmaker who came to camp with two siblings and their best friend, Seven Helton, 17.

The loudest and largest group surrounded Ollie Valdez-Ortiz, 18, a recent high school graduate with long wavy hair and a gentle charm. His mom had brought him and four other kids to camp, driving a rented van 10 hours from Brownsville in the Rio Grande Valley.

Once the parents had left, the campers filled out note cards with the names and pronouns they preferred, and picked which cabin they'd like to sleep in — there were cabins for girls, boys and nonbinary youth.

The campers and staff represented the full spectrum of queerness. All but four of the two-dozen staff members were queer or trans; the head counselor in Emma's cabin was a self-described

"late bloomer" who came out as transgender in her 60s. The kids identified as bisexual, pansexual, gay and straight. They were transgender, nonbinary, genderqueer and gender-fluid.

Color Splash Out had started just two summers before. The name came from the idea of "splashing out" to express originality. Now it refers to the camp's headline event: a game of capture the flag that involves pelting one another with socks filled with colored powders.

This year's camp was held at a resort in North Texas that also hosts weddings, birthday parties and spiritual retreats. It's a sprawling campus, with hiking trails and small sandy beaches surrounding a clutch of cabins, and a gathering hall where most activities would be held. There would be swimming in the lake, crafts and workshops, silly games and a talent show on the final night.

To Emma, the accommodations were nicer than those at last year's camp, even though there were tiny frogs in the showers and the cicadas chirped so loudly

at night that kids had to raise their voices to be heard outside. The food was bland — more than one meal included a "mystery meat," the kids joked.

The camp's founder is Yadi Martínez-Reyna, 46, who is nonbinary and uses they/them pronouns; the campers and staff describe them as blunt, fearless and supportive "with attitude." In June, the American Civil Liberties Union filed a grievance on behalf of Color Splash Out against the Princeton Independent School District, near Dallas, after the district canceled a planned Pride event and banned Martínez-Reyna and the organization from holding events on school grounds.

"Goofy" was the first word that came to mind when Emma met Martínez-Reyna at camp last year. "Just like me," she said.

The idea for the camp came from a weekend getaway from Martínez-Reyna, a pastor with United Church of Christ, had earned a master's degree in divinity. They went camping with friends to celebrate, and got to talking about the importance of youth camps in their childhood and how they'd like to create that experience for LGBTQ kids.

"That first year, we didn't have any money. We winged it," Martínez-Reyna said, "and it was great."

They raised a few thousand dollars that year to cover snacks and supplies for games and workshops, but the location and other costs were donated.

This year's camp had a budget of \$15,000, with two-thirds of that covered by a grant from the Trans Justice Funding Project, a non-charitable trust that supports transgender-led projects. Campers who could afford it were charged \$250.

Since the first camp, the need

**Camp continues on A16**



Campers, from left, Emma, 14, and Eva, 12, walk back to their cabin with house leaders Evie Wise and Alex Ysaguirre after swimming in the lake on the second day of Color Splash Out, one of only a few LGBTQ summer camps in Texas. The Chronicle is using a pseudonym to identify Emma because of her parents' concern for her safety.



Photos by Salgu Wissmath/San Antonio Express-News

Vivian Spitzer-Hanks, left, paints Emma's nails rainbow colors during quiet time after lunch on the second day of camp.

## CAMP

From page A15

for safe spaces for queer kids in Texas has only intensified, Martínez-Reyna said. The broader LGBTQ community has come under increasing pressure, but transgender people, and trans youth in particular, have been in the crosshairs.

In early 2022, the state attorney general issued a formal opinion that providing “sex-change” procedures to youth, including hormone therapies, could be considered “child abuse” under Texas law. A year and a half later, the Texas Legislature banned all gender-affirming care for minors; the state Supreme Court upheld the law in June. Doctors who provide such treatments can have their medical licenses revoked.

Texas also has passed laws that restrict drag shows and forbid transgender college students from competing on sports teams that match their gender.

This month, the state stopped accepting requests from Texans to change the gender marker on their driver's licenses or other state-issued IDs. In all, 69 bills perceived as anti-trans were introduced in the Texas Legislature last year, and four passed, according to the independent Trans Legislation Tracker.

Some Texas leaders have referred to transgender people as mentally ill or products of a social contagion, phrases that are hurtful and untrue. Texas Gov. Greg Abbott has said transgender schoolteachers should not be permitted to dress according to their gender identity. Other Texas Re-



Emma, whose family has moved to New Mexico to escape Texas' laws against transgender-affirming care, collects rocks at the lake.

publicans have said transgender people shouldn't be allowed to teach at all.

For the kids and staff at Color Splash Out, these are not empty threats. One trans camper was suspended from school for using the “wrong” bathroom.

A camp director lost a teaching job because she's transgender. One of the cabin leaders, a transgender man, left his job as a Child Protective Services worker after being asked to investigate the first case brought in Texas against parents raising a trans child.

“I feel like I've become desensitized to it, at this point,” Emma said of the repeated attacks on transgender youth.

These are not fragile kids, Martínez-Reyna said of the campers, but they are vulnerable. Many of them are angry and hurt. Martínez-Reyna has had to manage temper tantrums and destructive rages.

For many campers, in their

lives outside camp, the simplest activities — going to the bathroom, telling a substitute teacher their name — can be complicated and needlessly stressful.

At Color Splash Out, the gendered signs on the bathroom doors were covered with rainbow stickers — there were no “girls” or “boys” rooms. Kids could use whatever name they liked and change it at any time. In the cabins, campers hung Pride flags above their beds or other banners to show off their gender or sexual identity.

Next to the main hall was “Flossieville,” a quiet room where campers could chill out if they became overwhelmed. It's named after Flossie, a support poodle one of the staff members brings to camp every year. Emma visited once or twice a day. She can suffer sensory overload from crowds and noise and gets overwhelmed by too much socializing, so she'd stop into the quiet space for a rest

or to grab a pair of noise-canceling headphones before returning to the fray.

Many campers described themselves as works in progress — their identities shifting as they mature and learn more about themselves. Emma said she identifies as asexual and aromantic but acknowledges that she might not fully grasp her own sexuality yet.

“I think I've been all but two of those,” said 12-year-old Olivur, nodding at the various LGBTQ flags hung around the main hall. There were a dozen of them, signifying pansexual, bisexual, non-binary and lesbian, among others.

It was craft time after lunch, and the kids made musical instruments out of found items. Emma constructed a working pan flute out of straws; Olivur's instrument was a balloon filled with pebbles.

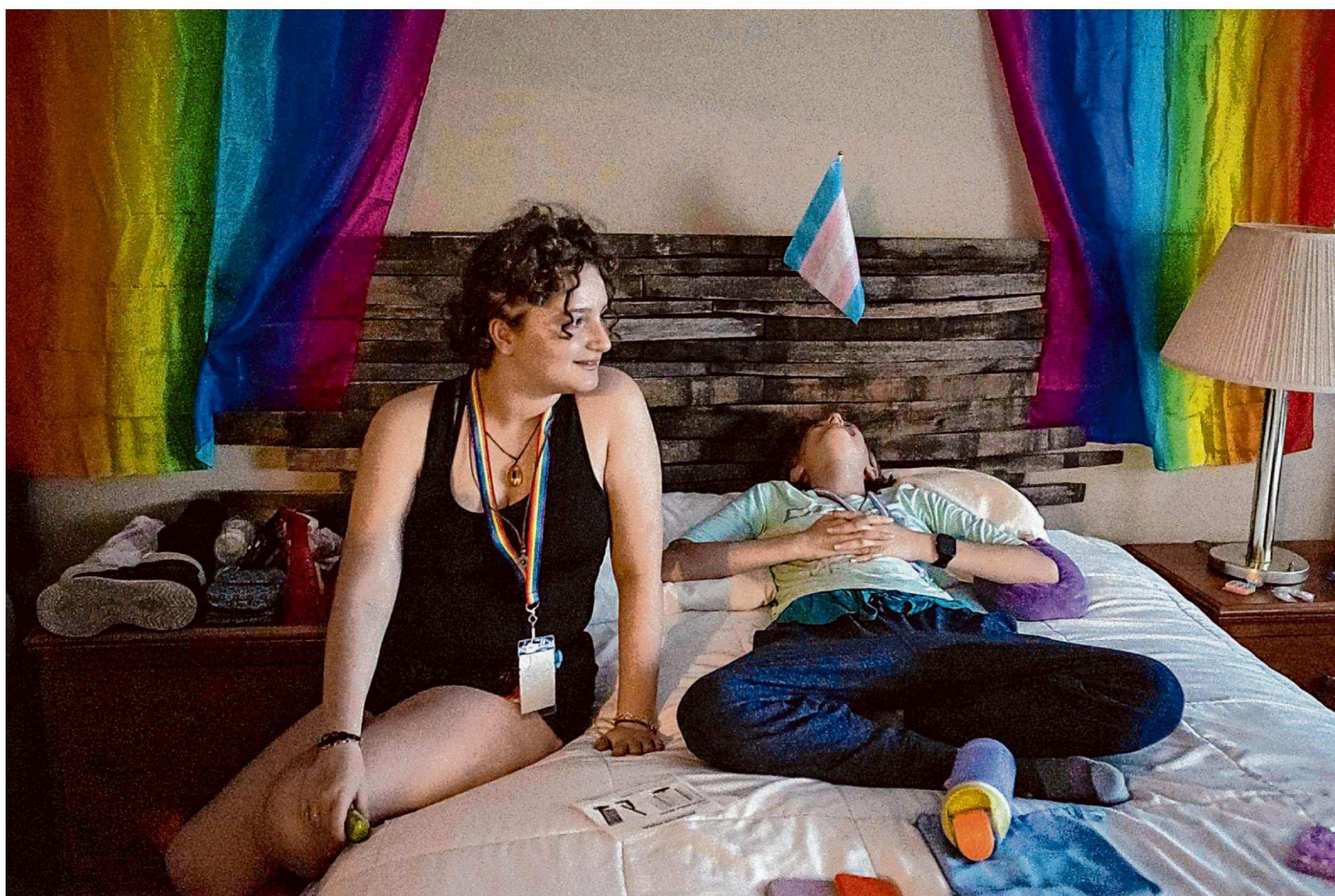
Olivur, who was experimenting with new pronouns (e/em/eir) and a new name at camp, came out last year as gender-fluid and now identifies as transmasculine.

For a while, Olivur was gender-faun — not identifying as a boy or nonbinary, but explaining, “I never feel like a girl.” Nearby, Emma's friend from Austin agreed.

When they were younger, that was how they felt too.

Hours later, Emma sat in the main hall in a row with her new housemates, fidgeting as Martínez-Reyna welcomed them and talked through the activities for the days ahead.

The campers still looked shy and nervous — in that liminal space specific to summer camp, where they've settled in but



Vivian sits on Emma's bed while their cabinmates goof around on the first day of summer camp. Emma added a small transgender flag to the head of her bed.



Photos by Salgu Wissmath/San Antonio Express-News

Campers and counselors play the camp's headline event, a game of capture the flag involving socks filled with colored powders.



From left, Rain, 17, Seven Helton, 17, and Olivur, 12, watch a game of kickball at Color Splash Out, which began two summers before.



From left, Ollie's mom, Lilia Ortiz, who drove from Brownsville, chats with house leaders Alex and Adora Ysaguirre.

haven't yet bonded over midnight confessions, sharing bags of gummy worms and Doritos around their bunks.

The camp theme this summer, Martínez-Reyna told the kids, was steampunk: embracing the past, present and future. One at a time, campers came forward to receive a keepsake necklace made of small watch parts and gears strung on leather cords — something to remind them, when they're feeling small, that they are not alone, Martínez-Reyna said.

Before going back to their seat, each camper was asked to state their intentions for these days at camp, confiding their answer to Martínez-Reyna or one of the other staff leaders.

Some couldn't say. Some wanted to make friends, have fun, swim in the lake.

One child leaned in close to Martínez-Reyna and lowered their voice: "I want to exist."

## DAY TWO

The morning started with a game of kickball. About half the campers participated, while the rest sat in small groups, cheering on the game or laughing among themselves. The nonbinary cabinmates sat together. The counselors joked about how sports are too binary — "We support all sides," they cheered.

Emma sat nearby, ignoring the game as she caught up with her friends from Austin. She's not much into sports, she said, but plays the flute and plans to join her high school marching band.

Emma, who describes herself as "gifted as heck," acknowledges she's dealt with anxiety ("it runs in my family") and issues related to being neurodivergent. Her mother describes her as unintentionally charming: "She's really great at disarming others and engaging with them at their level."

Emma was "gender-creative" from a very young age, her mother said, preferring feminine clothes even as a toddler. "I guess my parents knew I was trans before I did," she said. Her parents say that's probably true. She remembers first expressing to them that she didn't want to be a boy when she was around 8.

School for the most part was OK, especially in the early years when things weren't so gendered. But once in PE, when a teacher was dividing kids into groups of boys and girls, Emma asked, "What if I'm not either?"

"She just said pick a side," Emma said. "That's one of the core issues I have with PE, and humans in general — the need to put things in boxes."

Emma identifies as transfeminine now, but for a while her gender was fluid. During that time, her parents gave her pins with different sets of pronouns, and she would pin her preferred pronouns for the day to her clothes.

"I was a nerdy kid at that point," Emma said, "so once I got to, like, 80% girl, we started trying out names." The summer before fourth grade, they filled a jar with strips of paper with feminine names they liked, and every few days Emma would pick a new one to try.

As she got older, Emma became wary of going through male puberty. Her mother promised her that they would do their best to prevent that. But as they looked into gender-affirming options, Texas began clamping down.

Emma was aware that the attorney general had threatened to remove children from parents who supported their transition. Though she thought it was a "blank threat, mostly just to scare people," she realized, she said, "that I'm in danger, for just being myself."

Her parents, meanwhile, were terrified that someone might report them for supporting Emma. At one point, they put together a Google document with notes for Emma's care in case she was taken away.

At a gender care clinic in Austin, they managed to get her a first shot of hormone blockers to delay the onset of puberty. But then the clinic, under political pressure, stopped providing transition-related care to kids. Trying to ar-

range for the next shot was perilous. "I could tell it was super sketchy because we had to order drugs off the black market, quite literally," Emma said.

Albuquerque, 700 miles away, had the next closest gender clinic. The family considered taking Emma there for the treatments needed every three to four months, but the cost and inconvenience seemed too high. And Texas was beginning to feel unsafe. They decided to leave last summer.

In New Mexico, a real estate agent mentioned working with "several refugee Texas families." Emma's mother was startled.

"It didn't resonate at first, but that's what we are," her mother said. "The schools and the community and the state at large is not a safe space anymore."

"We're escaping an oppressive government," Emma's father said.

That period of time — scrambling to get care for Emma, feeling scared and anxious about being caught, facing a move out of state to flee government regulations — took a toll on the family. They spent months recovering, Emma's parents said, hunkering down in their new home with Emma's three younger siblings. Emma stopped playing the flute and did a year of virtual schooling.

Summer camp the past two years has provided a respite, and not just for Emma. For her parents, it was a relief knowing their child was being nurtured, if only for a few days, by her community.

"It's so important to have those safe spaces, where these kids can just let go a little bit and not be holding it all together and pretending they're someone they're not," Emma's mother said. "It's so much emotional labor to hide."

After the morning kickball game, the campers went swimming. Most wore oversized T-shirts and shorts — the swim uniform of adolescence. Emma wore a bikini.

The schedule called for quiet time after lunch, so Emma and Vivian Spitzer-Hanks, a housemate from the girls cabin, sat outside and painted their nails on a deck overlooking the lake. After coating her own nails in rainbow colors, Vivian, 14, took Emma's hand and started on her pinkie.

"This is so gay," Emma said. She looked down at their entwined fingers with a smirk.

"It's a mess," Vivian said with a laugh, trying to clean up a smudge of color.

"We're all a mess anyway," Emma said.

The crooked branches of boardwalk trees cast shadows over the benches where they sat, a calm breeze sweeping away the afternoon humidity.

Emma talked a little about her transition, and how absurd it felt to have to go to such lengths to get the drugs she needed. She gets her gender care from her pediatrician in New Mexico now, she said, blowing on her wet nails. "So it feels like it's just normal health care, which it is."

Vivian said her family wants to

**Camp continues on A18**



Vivian and Eva make faces in the mirror before heading out to another camp activity. They shared a cabin with two other girls and two house leaders, all of whom identified as queer or transgender.



Photos by Salgu Wissmath/San Antonio Express-News

Campers and counselors dance at Color Splash Out, which changes locations each year as a safety precaution.

## CAMP

From page A17

leave Texas, too: “We’re tired of it — the politics, the heat.”

Across the camp compound, Emma’s best friend from Austin was staying with Olivur in the Bee Hive, their name for the nonbinary cabin.

As night fell, staff took after-dinner nachos from cabin to cabin. The nonbinary youth tried to plan a sketch for the final night talent show. Discussions of a nonbinary “Romeo & Juliet” turned into a lively, mostly joking conversation about all the ways the world is gendered and how complicated it can be navigating those lanes.

What’s the nonbinary word for grandmother, they wondered. How did everyone feel about facial or leg hair? How should they choose pronouns if they didn’t feel a strong pull toward any gender?

The topic of names came up. “I’ve changed my name, like, six times,” said Emma’s friend.

Several campers said they took their names from favorite TV or book characters. Seven’s name is their favorite number. Rain’s came from the video game “Minecraft”: When they signed in for the first time, they were assigned a random username, Ambiguous Rain, “and I just went with it,” they said.

Rain and Seven are best friends from the suburbs of Dallas and plan to leave Texas together after they graduate high school. They intend to go to Arizona, where Rain will go to college to study filmmaking and Seven will figure out something.

Having each other and a close-knit group of queer friends has made school tolerable, Rain and Seven said. Both had struggled with coming out to their parents, worrying about being misunderstood or upsetting their families.

“At school, there are a bunch of people I don’t feel comfortable with, just a vibe I get, like I don’t want to be here or I’m not wanted,” said Seven, who is gender-fluid and pansexual. “Usually I’m pretty quiet. But I don’t have to be at camp.”

Both said they mostly shrug off any negativity they sense at school. “I’ve gotten to the point



Vivian does Emma’s makeup before the Variety Extravaganza Show, for which campers could dress up in donated clothes.

where if I’m not going to know someone past high school, I don’t care if they use the wrong pronouns or the wrong name,” Rain said. “If someone is like, ‘Are you a boy or a girl?’, I just stare at them.”

Still, at camp, “it’s nice to have a space where you don’t have to be something you’re not,” Rain said.

Rain’s mother, Patrice, said Rain had a lot of anxiety about coming out in middle school. Rain eventually crafted a multi-page email with references and links to explain their identity. Early on, when their parents would use the wrong name or pronouns, Rain “would get so upset with us, to the point that they were screaming, yelling, like, ‘You don’t believe me!’” Patrice said.

“But they went to camp, and they calmed down,” Patrice said. “And I think part of that was realizing — whatever happened at the first camp — they felt seen. And so when they came back, there wasn’t so much anger at us.”

### DAY THREE

Camp’s final day began with the headline event — a raucous, competitive game of capture the flag.

Emma and a dozen others sat it out, mostly to avoid getting powder all over their clothes and hair, but Martínez-Reyna and most of the staff took part. By the end, everyone was coated in chalky colors, and Martínez-Reyna was curled up on the ground laughing as campers from both teams pelted them with powder bombs.

As campers split into groups afterward, Emma went to the lake again, and others crafted beaded

friendship bracelets. A young staff member led one group on a hike.

“Which way?” asked a camper, as the group began to walk.

“Straight-ish!” said the staff member, pointing a finger off toward a trail that snaked into the trees.

“But we’re gay!” said the camper.

“I said ‘ish!’” responded the staff member, and they both broke into giggles.

Dad jokes and queer puns were the camp’s humor of choice. “How do nonbinary assassins kill?” began one popular joke. “They-slash-them!”

Joking helped temper the more serious issues. Almost every camper had at least one story of being bullied or assaulted for their gender or sexual identity. One transgender kid said their lesbian parents supported their coming out as gay but were less understanding about their gender identity.

Once, in middle school, Emma told her cabinmates, all of the girls in her class had to be screened for scoliosis, but when the teacher came to collect them she asked only for kids assigned female at birth. Emma didn’t stand. After the other girls had left, the teacher pointed out that Emma hadn’t gone with them and demanded an explanation — essentially outing her to the boys in her class. Emma became so upset that she started to sob, and her parents had to come get her.

“That was my first clear encounter with a transphobe,” Emma said as the other girls in the

cabin swore or nodded in sympathy.

But there was an upside: One of the boys in the class texted her after to ask if she was OK, which let Emma know she had someone on her side.

The camp counselors shared stories, too, talking about the challenges they faced as queer adults. Emma bonded with her house leader, Evie Wise, 65. Though their experiences were dramatically different, Wise began her transition a few years ago, too.

“My hope for them,” Wise said of the young trans campers she met, “is that they won’t have to literally look over their shoulder as they move into adulthood.”

Camp director Adora Ysaguirre, 29, told the campers that she’d been forced out of a teaching job for being transgender and talked about how difficult it was coming out to her family in her 20s. But in her high heels and celebrity-style sunglasses, she exuded a confidence that captivated the kids.

“It feels like there’s an inherent cost to being queer,” Ysaguirre said. She recognizes that she can’t replace what they have already lost, whether that loss is friends or trust in people who were supposed to support them. “But I’m somebody who can sit in the hurt with them. I can’t fix your problems, but I can definitely be by your side.”

After growing up in South Texas, Ysaguirre began her gender journey in college, and she started to identify as transgender two years ago. She said she can’t help but feel some envy toward the campers, “like, wow, you’re out there living your gender and you’re 13? I’m so happy that you don’t have to wait until you’re 20 or 30 or 40.”

But she also worries. She’s been verbally assaulted, she’s felt afraid for her physical safety, she’s been hurt and betrayed, and she knows many of the campers have had similar experiences. She worries, too, over how these kids are often sexualized — as being gay or transgender is inherently associated with sexual maturity.

There was flirting at camp — some hand-holding and pigtail-pulling, drawing fake mustaches over each other’s upper lips to have an excuse to be close. Most of the campers were teens.

“But they’ve been forced to enter adulthood in a sense, especially because the world treats queerness as this inherently adult thing,” Ysaguirre said.

“These kids are forced to defend and assert themselves. When I see their maturity and self-awareness, it makes me proud of them but also kind of sad that they’ve had to grow up like this.

“That’s why I want to give them a space where they can be a child,” she said.

Color Splash Out ended with the Variety Extravaganza Show. Everyone was encouraged to dress up. Martínez-Reyna had collected donated clothes throughout the year for the kids, and a few hours before the talent show began, campers were invited to select outfits.

Grinning, Rain held up a “Gay the pray away” T-shirt. Ollie tried on suit jackets, stretching his arms wide to test the fit in his shoulders.



Olivur, Rain and Seven Helton discuss ideas for a sketch for the talent show with their nonbinary cabinmates in “Flossville,” a quiet room where campers can go if they get overwhelmed.



Photos by Salgu Wissmath/San Antonio Express-News

Campers hang out together for the last time as they wait to be picked up from camp on June 20. The kids can stay in touch online on a Discord group chat.

"You're giving gay Founding Fathers," said a camp director to a camper wearing a button-down shirt and tie and a poofy gray wig.

Vivian found a red sequined gown for Emma, who hadn't been planning to dress up at all. The girls in her cabin did her makeup, too, and Wise's. Not usually much of a "girly-girl," Emma said, "I felt pretty."

The show ran almost three hours. Emma's crew — half a dozen kids she met at camp and from Austin — performed a skit based on Texas' youth fitness standards (apparently, it was hilarious to anyone who grew up in Texas public schools). She missed some of the other acts. Overstimulated by the lights and noise, she spent part of the night in Flossieville, where she had plenty of company.

Rain sang "7 Years," a Danish pop song "about how stuff is going to change but you always have to hope for the best." They performed alone, in a steampunk costume they'd designed at home, taking deep, bracing breaths between lines. Two campers did an interpretive dance involving a giant stick and a Pride flag.

Ollie joined a group of older campers to sing an a cappella version of Hozier's "Take Me to Church," their voices deep and resonant before the attentive audience.

Later, in Ollie's cabin, the boys swapped stories of traumas inflicted on them at other camps and in school. One boy who is gay was assaulted. All of the boys had experienced bullying.

When Ollie was in high school, he wasn't allowed to use the boys restroom because the school required students to use the facili-

ties that matched their assigned birth gender. But one day, a group of boys spotted him emerging from a girls' restroom. They became enraged by "a dude in the girls room." Ollie ran back inside and hid in a stall, crouching on the toilet seat. His mind flashed to high school horror films. He could hardly believe this was happening to him.

"After that, I would hold it in all the time," Ollie said.

Being a transgender teen in Texas "is a lot of not mentioning things about yourself," Ollie said. "It's safer to hide aspects of myself."

Ollie began to challenge gender expectations in elementary school, when he started dressing himself and choosing masculine clothes. He started seriously thinking about his identity in middle school, and during the COVID lockdown, without the pressure to conform in person at school, he began expressing himself online. He came out to his parents, who are divorced, around that time.

His mother has been supportive. His father has not. "We used to call almost every day, but after I came out, the calls declined drastically," Ollie said. "It was definitely, 'Oof, bro, I'm your kid.'"

School has been a mixed bag — the other students are mostly fine, and most teachers respect his gender. Bathrooms and locker rooms have been the biggest issue. Ollie's been reprimanded for using the boys restroom multiple times and once was given a full-day suspension.

He said he has to remind himself that, "I'm the face of whoever's going to come after me. So it's

a lot of, don't get upset visually, or don't cry too much. But internally, I'm scared and I'm angry."

Last year, Ollie spoke before the Texas Legislature against a bill banning transgender athletes from participating in sports aligned with their gender. The bill passed, but Ollie has embraced an activist role. There are times, though, that he doesn't want to fight.

"It's like a flip-flop," Ollie said from his bunk at camp as the other boys nodded along in agreement. "Sometimes you're just like, 'Fuck it, I'm going to be proud of who I am.'"

At camp, he doesn't have to think about any of that, doesn't have to do the complicated risk assessment of just being himself.

Usually, Ollie said, he avoids swimming because "I'm probably going to be harassed about my body."

"I never swim. I never, ever swim," he said.

Another camper looked up and laughed: "And you swam every day here."

#### DAY FOUR

The goodbyes were quick and furious on Thursday morning. Many of the campers had stayed up late the night before, and were crashed on their pillows and blankets in loose circles as they waited for their parents to arrive. A few teared up, and staff members pulled some aside for hugs and final whispered advice. The kids had created a Discord group chat after the first camp and planned to keep in touch online.

Emma claimed the front seat again for the drive back home, this time with three kids stuffed

into the back seat: the two she'd arrived with plus Olivur, who was getting a ride to Austin.

It was quieter this time. Everyone was exhausted, overstimulated and eager to get home, but they still had the camp sillies. Emma connected her phone to the car stereo and played DJ; she got Olivur to sing the viral hit "Skibidi Toilet" until Olivur realized the others were recording and laughed and pushed them away.

They didn't make any prank calls on the long trip home. Emma was pretty sure their number had been blocked, and, besides, they had more interesting things to do.

In a few weeks, Emma would start high school. For the first time in her life, she would be able to choose whether she would tell anyone she was transgender. It promised a fresh start: no classmates who knew her by another name, no teachers fumbling with new pronouns, no PE instructor insisting she was something she's not.

Emma hadn't yet decided when, or if, she would share her identity. For her, being transgender is as intrinsic as the color of her hair or being left-handed, and ought to be about as unremarkable.

She appreciates that's not the world she lives in now. Someday, she hopes she doesn't have to hold herself quite so close. She hopes she won't feel the need to hide — won't be forced to flee, even — and instead can be seen exactly as she is.

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Stephanie Spitzer-Hanks, center, picks up her daughter Vivian, left, and Ellie, 14, on the last morning of Color Splash Out.