

Diva with a Cause: Laverne Cox finds fuel for social change in self-love



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By Katie Hewitt

Laverne Cox strikes an alluring pose in a black satin bodysuit and diamonds. The plush white coat she's draped over one shoulder slips to the floor.

"Don't you just hate it when your faux fur falls off your shoulders during your #Cosmo photoshoot?" she captioned the recent Instagram video.

Honestly, who *hasn't* had that happen?

In real life, the actress is humble, thoughtful and grounded. Her glitzy social media persona seems laced with irony, a wink to the cult of celebrity and her unexpected role in it. Cox is self-aware, self-assured and confident, but it's clear these qualities were gained through struggle, not ego.

Cox grew up in Mobile, Alabama, where she was violently bullied for identifying as a girl. She called it her "childhood trauma" in a 2014 interview with *TIME*—the magazine's first cover story featuring a transgender person. More recently in February, she became the first transgender person to grace a *Cosmopolitan* cover (the shoot where the faux-fur mishap occurred).

Cox is now far from the Heart of Dixie; she lives in LA but calls herself "such a New Yorker" who only defected from the city because of its notoriously cramped quarters: "I can't live in one room anymore."

Maybe it triggered memories of going stir crazy for the small screen; her best-known character *did* spend some time in solitary confinement. Fans know Cox as inmate Sophia Burset on the Netflix series *Orange is the New Black*—the role that nabbed her a Primetime Emmy nod, making her the first openly transgender person to be nominated for acting.

Off screen, Cox is a public leader for the LGBTQ movement, supporting and speaking out on behalf of various organizations and causes, including GLAAD, a non-profit that works to promote acceptance

through media. She's also spoken at WE Day California in LA. "I'm a big old ham," she says, "so I love a room full of people listening to me." She ends this thought on a serious note about the youth empowerment event: "It was so inspiring—17,000 kids committed to service."

Her latest role is host of *Glam Masters*, a reality competition show that will secure the winning beauty blogger a job at producer Kim Kardashian's make-up company. As if that wasn't extra enough, Cox just released her first single, "Beat for the Gods," a campy, electronic dance song that she insists is not the start of a music career. She seems determined to follow all of her passions, however extracurricular.

From behind the scenes at WE Day California, WE talk to Laverne Cox about building bridges, her advice for youth and why she's not a role model.



@lavernecox

WE: What's the cause closest to your heart?

LC: I always talk about LGBT issues and particularly trans issues. There are so many trans issues. [Through proposed legislation, policymakers have] tried to criminalize us going to the bathroom. I've always been clear that these anti-trans bathroom laws aren't about bathrooms at all; they're about whether we have the right to exist in public space. Protecting trans kids in schools. Young people who are fighting for themselves and for other people, who are trans and just want to be treated like everybody else.

WE: Where do you think we stand on that issue?

LC: We still aren't at a place where trans folks are treated with the dignity and respect that we deserve, where our gender identity is acknowledged under the law—in public policy, in the hearts and minds of Americans—so that the unemployment rate isn't three times the national average. We are murdered, denied housing and access to health care. We're under attack *right now*; that's an urgent thing and something that I need to talk about. [I want to] create spaces of empathy where people can connect with trans stories. With that empathy, maybe we can connect and tell politicians that we have a right to exist.

WE: How does it feel to be a role model?

LC: I don't like the term 'role model.' I like the term 'possibility model' because I think it's about what is possible. I don't want to live my life exactly like people who've inspired me.

WE: Like who?

LC: Candis Cayne, the first trans woman to have a recurring role in a primetime TV show, ten years ago. If it weren't for her, I wouldn't be here. I wouldn't have known that it was possible to be out and trans and on television working as an actor. It's about possibility and a sense of hope.

WE: We're at a time right now that can feel very divisive, both socially and politically. What's one thing people can do to build bridges instead of barriers?

LC: I think voting is really important, a basic thing. Getting it in everybody's minds that elections matter. I don't think people fully realized how much elections matter—though I think they're starting to now.

There's a lot of things people can do. What [do] I always say around activism and advocacy? [If] there's some issue that really speaks to you—something that gets you in your gut, that you get really upset and annoyed about, *why can't we change this?* That's where you should go. You should listen to what [that] passion is, what the call is.

WE: What advice would you give to a young person who feels different, whether they are part of the trans community, or feel different for another reason?

LC: I believe in my spirit that we are all called here for something bigger than ourselves and that we are divinely made. I know that to be true in my spirit. Even through all my struggles, I knew that I was here for a reason. I think when a young person is struggling, remember, that that struggle is for a reason... without a test there is no testimony. You're not alone.

The struggle [for me] was that I thought I was the only one. That I was not lovable and no one could ever love me and no one could ever accept me—and that's a lie. You have to know that you are here for a divine reason and that you are not alone. The struggle is for something bigger; you might not know what it is, but if you can listen to it and be open, you have to just survive. You have to survive to be here for the miracle.

This interview has been condensed and edited.