

Danica Roem: A Virginia Hometown Story with a Nationally Historic Importance

Danica Roem of Manassas, Virginia is the first transgender person in the United States to be elected to a state legislature and to assume her office. She currently serves as the Virginia Delegate representing the 13th District.

Roem was born in Manassas in 1984 and has lived the majority of her life there. Roem's family was shaken very early in her life when her father committed suicide. Roem herself was only three years old, and her widowed mother was supported by Roem's grandfather – who became a strong family role model for Danica.

Roem picked up on her grandfather's love of baseball and his daily newspaper habit. Danica took up baseball, but faced taunting by teammates for being awkward and effeminate. Even as a child, Roem identified as female, trying on women's accessories in private – hoping her grandfather would not find out and disapprove. Roem later described her struggles with gender dysphoria as "suffocating."

The daily newspaper habit, however, had a strong and positive impact on Roem. She earned a bachelor's degree in journalism. Roem's professors described her as tenacious and persistent, and as having her priorities straight to work as a journalist amplifying voices that are overlooked or lack strong political connections. But, the university culture did not welcome LGBT+ people – and was especially hostile to transgender people. Roem – despite loving college – would at times stay in her dorm room for days at a time to avoid being seen. Nevertheless, she started her career with intensity and skill – and she focused again on her hometown, a focus that has rung true throughout her life.

Roem became a renowned Virginia journalist. She worked for the *Gainesville Times* and the *Prince William Times*, as first a reporter and then an editor, focusing on Prince William County politics. Roem won awards from the Virginia Press Association seven times. She was the pick to interview gubernatorial candidates in Virginia, and she was well-regarded in the journalism industry. But, her byline at the time read, "Dan Roem."

In 2012, Roem privately began her physical gender transition. In 2013, she came out in the open as a transgender woman. Upon coming out, Roem remarked she didn't lose a single friend and was received with support and understanding from her colleagues. In 2015, her legal name changed to "Danica" – and her byline with it. Although she was greeted with love and acceptance among her friends and colleagues, that was notably not the case from her local representatives. Her state representative, Robert G. Marshall – who described himself as "Virginia's chief homophobe" – had repeatedly pushed legislation that attacked LGBT+ people and restricted their rights. Now an out trans woman, Roem attended hearings in Richmond to testify against Marshall's bills.

Roem was approached by Virginia Delegate Rip Sullivan to run for her local state delegate seat, the one currently held by "chief homophobe" Marshall. Roem said she had never considered running for office before being approached by Delegate Sullivan, but it did not take much convincing. Roem challenged Marshall for the delegate seat in 2017.

Marshall refused to debate Roem during the campaign. Marshall intentionally misgendered Roem in his speeches and written campaign literature, openly questioned Roem's transgender identity, and was supported by "American Principals Project" robocalls that accused Roem of supporting "transgender medical experiments on children." Marshall even attacked Roem for being the lead vocalist of the local metal band, Cab Ride Home – calling her participation in a metal band "lewd" and "bad judgement" in campaign ads.

Roem responded to these attacks by doggedly focusing on local issues in the race. Despite receiving nationwide recognition, Danica only occasionally focused on the historic status of her campaign, keeping local issues as the campaign's focal point. She personally canvassed the district, meeting voters in her trademark rainbow headscarf and high heels. When asked on NPR's *The Koyo Nnamdi Show* about how her transgender identity helped inspire her to run for office, Roem quickly pivoted: "What motivated me to the run is the fact that my mom's been commuting up and down Route 28 for more than 30 years – more than 30 years to provide for her family – and Delegate Marshall cares more about where I go to the bathroom as a transgender woman than how his constituents get to work."

The voters agreed with Roem. She won the Virginia 13th District Delegate seat by 8 points, which is a significant margin. Roem declared, "Discrimination is a disqualifier." When Roem took office, she became the first openly transgender person in the country to be elected to a legislative position and serve. Roem's mother had beamed at her historic run and reflected that Roem's grandfather (who had since passed) would be proud. But, Roem acknowledged with emotion while gesturing to herself, "Ma, I don't know if he'd be proud. Because, he wouldn't be proud of this. I don't know how he'd ever reconcile the idea that his grandkid is transgender, and his grandkid is running for office as a trans woman." Even in historic nomination and victory, Roem's story is an acknowledgement of the difficulty LGBT+ people face in their lives and the painful rejection they can face – whether feared or actual – in the process of coming out to loved ones.

Roem won re-election in 2019 and 2021 by even wider margins than she won against Marshall. She is the first openly transgender person to win re-election to a legislative seat. In the Virginia House of Delegates, Roem chairs the Communications Subcommittee and the local Charters Subcommittee – and, of course, she serves with the Transportation Committee to work on those traffic snarls that plagued her mom and so many others.