

# Southeast Michigan Community Mourns Loss of Dani Som, 20

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

Though he had relocated to Portland, Oregon, last summer, when word traveled back to Detroit that 20-year-old Dani Som, aka Dani Sommerville, had taken his own life in February, his friends here were devastated. By all accounts, Som was bold, audacious and outgoing. He was confident in his identity as a trans man who was disabled, and he advocated for all the communities of which he was a part.

Som had moved to Portland to make a new life for himself but less than a year later, he ended it. As is often the case with suicide, friends and family were left with lingering questions. A memorial service took place at the Affirmations LGBTQ community center last month, where Som had been very active before relocating.

Lilianna Reyes, now working at Ruth Ellis Center, was the youth program coordinator when Som first came to the center.

"Dani was a spitfire," Reyes said. "He really believed in equality. He believed in trying to understand people. He was a fun person. He liked to make people laugh, and he was creative."

Reyes, who is transgender herself, was there as a support when Som first began transitioning, too.

"He didn't know which name he wanted to choose," Reyes recalled. "He didn't know if he wanted to be Henri or Dani. He said, 'I want to be a trans man. I feel like I am a trans man. But I don't know what that means.' So we talked a lot about him ... we talked about transitioning and finding your power in transitioning. There were lots of discussions that he and I had about power and privilege and what people can do to make this life better."

After Reyes left her position, Ian Unger took

over the youth group at Affirmations and began regular interactions with Som. Unger said he was quickly taken by Som's charm and positive outlook.

"He identified as a trans man, as do I," Unger said. "We talked a lot about the politics of LGBT gender identities and queer theory."

Unger said that Som went through several rounds of the curriculum-based youth program offered at Affirmations and was active in the youth drop-in center as well. Unger said he noted that Som always had an eye out for ways in which to improve existing systems.

"He gave lots of feedback, different things he noticed or that he thought we could improve on," Unger said. "He always gave active feedback."

And as he continued to grow in his identities, Som became even more active. In addition to Affirmations, Som attended FtM Detroit meetings. He wrote and performed music accompanying himself on the guitar, he was published on the website The Mighty and he was the head intern for a while at the charity Mi Community, a social engagement organization for Autistic individuals founded in honor of his late friend. Som was a member of the Trans Student Educational Resources, the only national organization led entirely by transgender youth. He was also a member of the Gender Spectrum National Youth Council.

"He was such a joy to have a part of the group," said Jenna Hackman, a member of the council. "I distinctly remember his interview for the council because he was the only person we accepted on the spot right away. We could see such a spark in him from the beginning. His commitment to helping others and fighting for justice in the world will be truly missed."

In addition to writing for The Mighty, Som was interviewed by Klie Kliebert for a series called "More Than Trans."



Dani Som

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- Lilianna Reyes

all of your medical quirks."

Though friends say he enjoyed living in Portland, they also report that there he continued to suffer from depression and anxiety. He took medications such as Abilify but, mostly, struggled in silence. Som's friend Mirror Rose said that in the week before his death he started isolating himself. His depression appeared to worsen and he began experiencing suicidal ideation.

"He was exhibiting the symptoms of anxiety and possible panic attack moments before he left," Rose went on. "He had been pacing for roughly 30 minutes before he left."

Som told Rose he was going to McDonald's to meet a friend when he left his room at the Nooch House, a queer punk house where Som lived in Portland. However, his body was discovered in an abandoned house not far away.

Back in Michigan, Unger said he was "not necessarily surprised, but definitely disheartened and really sad" to learn that Som had died by suicide.

"He was an activist all the way through," Unger said. "He was very proud of his identities and even when people in his life weren't supportive of his trans and non-binary identities, he still persevered and was himself."

"He volunteered for an interview with me because he knew that his story needed to be told," Kliebert said in an online post about Som. "He was funny. He was sassy. He was direct. He knew what he wanted. He went for it. He cared deeply for his peers. He wanted other kids to feel seen and represented. He wanted us to do better. He asked me to grow, and so I grew. He may not know it, but Dani will stay with me."

In the "More Than Trans" piece, Dani said, "I just want people to know that your disability, mental illness or neurodivergence is just as beautiful an identity as your trans one. Embrace