

## Em Jenkins: An Open Letter to Rep. Kera Birkeland

Though I cannot relate to being a cis, straight member of the Legislature, I feel your humanity.



(Trent Nelson | The Salt Lake Tribune) Rep. Kera Birkeland, R-Morgan, during debate in the Utah Senate over a bill that would bar transgender girls from competing in school sports matching their gender identities, in Salt Lake City on Friday, March 4, 2022.

By Em Jenkins | Special to The Tribune

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<https://www.sltrib.com/opinion/commentary/2022/03/10/em-jenkins-an-open-letter/>

My name is Em Jenkins. I am the queer high school student you shook hands with on February 28 at the Utah Capitol. Thank you for the time you took to speak with me.

In our conversation, we spoke about compassion and empathy. We spoke about the suicide rates of my peers, and you promised you were assessing the implications of your proposed bill on transgender student athletes. But your actions during the last night of the Utah legislative session left me confused, conflicted and scared as I watched the debate over [HB11](#) on my phone.

You had told me your priority was to avoid a ban on transgender athletes while still “protecting women’s sports.” And yet [you let a ban pass](#). Your vote, the speech you gave to your colleagues on the House floor, all helped that ban pass.

I am disheartened by your dishonesty. But, far more pressingly, I am afraid for the well-being and lives of my peers. These are my friends who you blatantly, and inaccurately, depicted as being unwelcome in our state, in our communities, and in our athletics.

When you shook my hand, I felt hope. When you looked in my eyes and told me you had compassion for all students, I felt your humanity. I felt you had space in your heart to empathize with the population you have been persecuting. Perhaps I was projecting.

Actions speak louder than words, and you have shown no compassion to the LGBTQ students who are begging you for it.

Rep. Birkeland, I cannot relate with you. I do not know what it is like to be cis and straight. I do not know what it is like to be a member of the Utah House of Representatives. I do not know what it is like to turn a blind eye to death, oppression and betrayal. I do not know what it is like to value anything above the lives and well-being of children. I don't know what it is like to be in your position.

However, despite the fact that I cannot relate with you, my heart is filled with love for you. I felt your humanity when we met, and I believe all humans are deserving of love. I will continue to strive to empathize with you and your colleagues who voted for your bill.

I am saddened that you were not able to feel my humanity despite my efforts. I hope that one day you will, despite not being able to relate with us, reciprocate the love and empathy we give you. I hope you can open your heart and begin to live according to your words, to show genuine "compassion to all."

With all sincerity,

Em Jenkins

**Em Jenkins** is a student from Ben Lomond High School in Ogden.