



Cass Draws Outside the Lines

Cass Bliss was so open about being a transgender and non-binary menstruator that they were recognized as a world leader. Along the way, they also created Toni the Tampon to illustrate what it's like to have a period

Note: this episode talks about cyberbullying, so you might want to listen with an adult.

Narration: Before we get started, I want to give you a heads up. On this episode, we'll be mentioning a person's experience with cyberbullying. We think this is an important topic to discuss, but if it's going to be hard for you to hear, we recommend listening with a caring adult.

Cass Bliss: Getting my period was really the first marker of my body betraying me.

Narration: This is Cass Bliss, who goes by the pronouns they and them. They were assigned female at birth and are trans and non-binary. That means their experience of gender exists outside the categories of "female" and "male."

Our producer, Mia, and I talked to Cass about growing up in a body that up until puberty they loved.

Cass: So, as a kid, I mostly wore my brothers' clothing. I looked very androgynous except for my hair. I had hair growing down to my butt. I played sports, I had holes in my jeans, I had really long t-shirts that didn't fit...and normally, I was really, really outgoing. I had so much energy, and I would literally bounce off the walls...

Narration: Welcome to Feeling My Flo, a podcast for all things period. I'm Kamilah Kashanie.

You might remember that in our first episode, we said people along the gender spectrum *can and do* experience menstruation. That's because getting a period is a biological event, but gender identity is not always tied to biology.

Today, we're going to spend some time getting to know Cass, who has a period and even created an illustrated tampon character. We'll get to that later in the episode.

Cass spent their childhood in the Democratic Republic of Congo as the kid of Christian missionaries. And in their family, periods just weren't talked about, but that didn't mean puberty wasn't going to happen for Cass.

Cass: I didn't develop 'til I was about 16, 17, really, and puberty was the first time that I felt ashamed of my body. When I was in middle school, I joined the girls' soccer team. A lot of the girls were older, and they were talking about how they were excited to get their periods, how makeup and puberty was going to make them into the women that they wanted to be.

Narration: Cass remembers this one day they were at a teammate's house.

Cass: I was sitting on someone's bed, and they ended up just kind of holding me down and putting makeup on me, because it was this whole joke that, *Why wasn't I excited about puberty? Why wasn't I excited about being a woman?*

Narration: But, Cass knew that for them, becoming a woman was just *wrong*, and one change was *especially* devastating.

Cass: I just saw that brown spot that you see, and when I saw my underwear, I broke down crying. I didn't want to go to school. Part of me felt like I had to pretend to be happy and to celebrate it, but every other part of my body was screaming, "This is wrong."

Narration: Cass didn't feel like they could talk to their parents about this, because they never even had a conversation about what menstruation *was*.

Cass: All I knew was that I was going to bleed at some point and that it was going to be a thing that happened to me every month for a few days. And, most of that education I got from my friends, 'cause my friends all got their periods before me.

So, I didn't even read the pamphlet my mom got me. I mean, it was covered in pink and everything, and that was my least favorite color at the time, so I refused to even read it.

Narration: So, fast forward a few years. Cass was at college in the U.S. In one of their classes, they had an assignment that required them to tackle a taboo. Cass knew they wanted to talk about periods, so they started doodling cartoons on a blank page...and Toni the Tampon was born.

The idea was to show that periods weren't just for cis girls and women. So, Cass created a group of characters of *multiple* gender identities, and we actually got a copy.

Kamilah Kashanie: Hey, Mia. So can you describe what we're looking at?

Mia Warren: In my hands right now I've got Cass' coloring book. It's called *The Adventures of Toni the Tampon*. And, there are actually four main characters in here: Patrice the Pad, Sebastian the Sponge, Marina the Menstrual Cup, and of course, Toni the Tampon.

Kamilah: So I love it! It's not just a coloring book. There's activities in there too!

Mia: Oh yeah, there's one activity too...

Kamilah: There's a maze...

Mia: A maze that is shaped like...

Kamilah: Oh my gosh! It's, it's like the reproductive system. It's...you enter in through the fallopian tubes, and you go through the uterus and the ovaries and all that good stuff, and then out of the vaginal canal is the end of the maze. That's amazing.

Mia: Yeah. You can tell that Cass was able to come really far in thinking about menstruation in their own way and sort of celebrating it in their own way. And you know, this isn't something that Cass told us they did a lot as a kid. Puerty was super hard for them. So, it's like... it's kind of amazing to see them, take back the narrative with this coloring book. Should we break out... the crayons right now?

Kamilah: The crayons? Oh yes, Mia. Yes, I would so color this. [Laughs.]

Mia: Let's do it. [Laughs.]

Narration: After college, Cass moves back to Congo, gets a job, and self-publishes the coloring book.

Cass: Nobody paid attention to it [laughs]. Nobody cared. I think three of my friends bought it, and that was it. It really wasn't until Breitbart attacked me a few months later that it kind of became a lot bigger.

Narration: In case you haven't heard of Breitbart, it's a far-right, deeply conservative media platform. In 2016, it got a lot of traction for spreading misinformation during the presidential campaign, and the consensus is that it's racist, sexist, homophobic, and xenophobic.

Cass: So, I'm actually just sitting in the living room of my parents' apartment, using their Internet, and Google pops up with an alert...

...and says, "You've been featured in the news."

Mia: Cass told us when the article came out, they were already feeling depressed and far away from their friends in the U.S.

Cass: There I was, sitting there, and I didn't really have great Internet access, so I had to wait for 30 minutes for a page to load. And, I just kept scrolling through the comments and, I mean, all of them were: *Kill yourself, you belong in an asylum...* um... *Your parents probably hate you, like, You're the reason that humanity is, you know, messed up.*

I was so overwhelmed. It felt like the entire world was turning on me, and that I had no one that was backing me up.

Narration: To make things worse, it wasn't just Breitbart. The Christian Post wrote about them too. That's an evangelical website, and they compare the coloring book to child abuse.

Cass' parents' apartment in Congo was near the base of a giant volcano.

Cass: I just remember wanting to just walk off the edge and disappear.

Narration: So, what were people so mad about? A lot of the backlash was about the characters in the book. Toni the Tampon is non-binary and Sebastian the Sponge is male. And, not everybody liked that message, the message that non-female-identifying people could menstruate.

Kamilah: So, tell me about the picture that you took.

Cass: Um, so the picture is me sitting on a bench, wearing khakis and a colored checkered shirt. I am holding a sign that says, "Periods are not just for women #BleedingWhileTrans." And, on my pants is a period blood stain.

Narration: After a few days, the photo went viral. Teen Vogue wrote about it. There was a lot of positive coverage, but there was also a lot of hate.

Cass: If I thought that the Internet trolls the first time were bad, this was horrendous. I got really, really scared.

Narration: People were threatening to *dox* Cass—that means to share their personal information, like where they lived.

Cass: I felt like I was stuck in the middle where a lot of people that work in menstrual health or were proud of their periods were really angry with me that I was taking away something from women or ruining the movement.

Narration: And, it wasn't just cisgender folks attacking Cass; there was anger coming from trans people, too.

Cass: There were a lot of trans men who didn't want to talk about their period, and understandably...I mean, it's really difficult for me even to talk about my period, because it is something that's so associated with womanhood.

Kamilah: What kind of makes you continue doing the work that you're doing and having these conversations... and putting yourself out there in that way?

Cass: God help me, every day I ask myself that question. I don't know... it's because it needs to happen. There needs to be someone talking about it, because there's a lot of things that do need to change. I mean, we still have feminine hygiene signs in all of the CVS and Walgreens, which is literally a sign that points down at me and says I don't belong there.

Narration: So after all this, Cass has become something of an activist, even if at times a reluctant one.

Cass: There just weren't very many people talking about it, and I just kind of stumbled into it. And since then, I mean, I've embraced it a little bit, but God, it makes my life so hard, um, sometimes. [Sighs.]

It's not that I've gotten used to it, because I don't think you can get used to strangers screaming at you—you can't get used to that—but, I do wake up with it every day.

Narration: Throughout their journey, Cass has become super visible online for raising awareness about menstruation.

Cass: It's actually funny. Just today, I did just buy a ticket to New York, though, so [laughs]. I don't know if you know Bustle released a Rule Breakers list a while ago. So, it's like a 29 rule breakers with Janelle Monáe and a couple other people, and I happen to have landed on it...

Kamilah: Aww, I bet Mia's hype about that!

Mia: Yeah!

Narration: Yeah, we love Janelle Monáe at Feeling My Flo. Give her *all* the Grammys.

And at the time this interview was recorded, Cass was having an exciting moment. But, the reality remains that as Cass continues to stand up for what they believe, it's taken a toll on them.

Cass: Since I've started doing this work, my mental health has been kind of a lot worse, but what keeps me going is I didn't want anyone else to feel the way that I felt. So, even if I get one comment of someone that says it made a difference in their life, or one parent that says that they now understand what their kid is going through, if I get one of those against three thousand death threats and hateful messages, to me that's worth it.

Narration: Since we recorded this episode with Cass, they've taken a step back from period activism, choosing to focus on other projects.

If you identify as LGBTQ and have questions about your menstrual health, a good starting point is thetrevorproject.org or helloclue.com.

Feeling My Flo is a resource to help you start important conversations at critical moments... like when you have really bad period cramps and need a distraction. We're here to inform, entertain, and empower. Visit us at feelingmyflo.com and follow us on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram to join the conversation.

Thanks for listening to Feeling My Flo. Special thanks to Roselyn Almonte for this episode. Mia Warren is our producer. Carolina Rodriguez is our sound engineer. Our intern is Emma Forbes. And the podcast is a production of Lantigua Williams & Co. I'm Kamilah Kashanie.

CITATION

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