

ASHLEY DIAMOND

b. 1978

TRANSGENDER PRISON ACTIVIST

“While it seems like the world is so obsessed with ‘Orange Is the New Black,’ I’m living it.”

Her lawsuit forced Georgia to reclassify hormone therapy as a medical necessity for transgender inmates.

Ashley Diamond is a transgender prisoners’ rights activist. In 2016 she won a landmark case against the Georgia Department of Corrections that forced the state to reclassify hormone therapy as a medical necessity for transgender inmates.

Diamond was born and raised in Rome, Georgia. As a youngster, she told her parents she identified with a TV cartoon, “Jem and the Holograms,” about a girl rock star with alter egos. After she attempted suicide at age 15, Diamond was diagnosed with gender dysphoria. The recognition gave her hope for the first time in her life.

Diamond’s Southern Baptist family rejected her gender identity. Her father kicked her out, and Diamond moved in with a “privileged, white family.” She began hormone therapy at age 17.

Passionate about singing, Diamond frequently performed in Atlanta clubs and traveled to New York where she appeared on talk shows to discuss her transgender experience. Even so, she struggled to maintain a reliable income. She frequently faced discrimination when employers discovered she was a transgender woman.

In 2011 an emotionally abusive boyfriend convinced Diamond to pawn his stolen goods. He led her to commit nonviolent “crimes of survival” for which she was sentenced to 11 years in prison.

Despite federal standards classifying transgender inmates as vulnerable and in need of continuously reviewed placement, Diamond served her time in an all-male prison. Officials forced her to strip naked in front of other inmates, an initiation that began years of “degrading and abusive treatment.” Fellow prisoners raped her repeatedly. Prison staff ignored her reports of assault, merely advising her to “be prepared to fight.”

Diamond was also denied the medically necessary hormones she had been taking for 17 years. The disruption triggered a painful physical and emotional transformation that led her to multiple suicide and self-castration attempts. Guards placed her in solitary confinement for “pretending to be a woman.”

In 2015 Diamond and the Southern Poverty Law Center filed a class-action lawsuit against the Georgia Department of Corrections (GDC) for failing to provide transgender prisoners medically necessary hormone therapy and safe prison assignment. A few days after the case was filed, Diamond was released on parole. The following year, she reached a settlement with the GDC that prompted multiple statewide policy changes.

Diamond was reincarcerated for a parole violation in 2019. Despite Georgia’s new policies supporting transgender inmates, the state again placed her in a men’s facility, and she again endured abuse. In November 2020 she filed a second lawsuit.

Diamond continues to fight for a transfer to a women’s facility.

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