

Kenny Ethan Jones:

L i v i n g m y t r u t h

He made history by becoming the first trans man to front a period campaign and, since then, the only way is up for activist Kenny Ethan Jones as he tackles topics from body politics to mental health, all with his signature dose of candid authenticity. Here, we find out more about the journey that led him to where he is today

Writing | Kathryn Wheeler

Hi Kenny! When we spoke in May 2020, you said that mental health mattered to you because it's a universal experience. That stuck with me, what did you mean by that? We're all humans, right? And we all differ in moods. So that's my classification of mental health. It's something that we all experience in our own way, but we can all relate to feeling extremely happy or feeling low.

When I was younger, I didn't understand. I just thought, "Oh, these things are happening, emotions are happening," there wasn't a word. I think about my parents and the way they were raised, there wasn't any discussion

of mental health. But we've moved to a place where this generation is so much more aware.

When did you first start having conversations about mental health? I would say around the same time that I started to experience body dysmorphia. I began to realise that how I felt towards my body was affecting the way that I carried myself on a day-to-day basis. I was probably around 11 years old.

I understood that there was something else going on, but as a kid – mental health, what's that? It's only when you start to have grown up conversations, where

you talk to people about what's actually going on inside, that you start to understand that there's a lot more going on than you thought.

When you began having those conversations, how did people react? People just didn't get it. You're talking maybe 16 years ago, people weren't really aware of what being transgender was. Some people would be quite positive and others would just totally dismiss how I was feeling. It boarded up my feelings, and I only started to have those deeper conversations with people that I really trusted.

“ I don't want somebody else to grow up like how I did, it shouldn't be that way



I had a smaller platform, it was very much trans guys, probably about five years younger than me, reaching out, saying, “I'm so grateful to have you there as a role model.” But now my page has become more established as a resource for parents, teachers, and doctors.

Do you think things are different for young trans kids today? Yes. 100%. Some of the most common DMs that I get on social media are from parents of trans kids – they're so much more aware now of how their children feel. I'll have conversations with a mother, and she will tell me the conversations that they've had with their child about how they feel around their gender, and

how that translates into their day-to-day life. It's really wild that those conversations are happening now.

It speaks volumes that it's parents reaching out as well, and not just the individuals themselves.

I would say I probably get messages from parents or teachers more so than I do actual trans people. I think that when

Did you have role models when you were growing up? Not who were trans, no. I'd never seen anybody close enough to me to be, like, that feels like me. Even to this day, I would say that there's a lot more trans women in the media than trans men. I've tried to become my own role model if I'm honest. I was just like, right, no one's going to do it for me! >>>

For more from Kenny, follow him on Instagram @kennyethanjones

As I got older, I held that really close to my heart and thought I don't want somebody else to grow up like I did, it shouldn't be that way.

Thinking back over those formative years, is there a standout moment where someone did something supportive or empowering for you?

I can't say one particular moment, but I can say one particular person, and it has to be my mum. She was my number one support, hands down. The first time we had a conversation about me being trans was basically me coming home one day and spewing out how I felt. I basically said that I was attracted to women. So my mum turned around and was, like, "Oh, so you're a lesbian?" And I was, like, "No, it's a bit more than that." [Laughs] And we dived into it a bit more, and literally after that conversation she turned around and said to me: "I think we should go to the doctor. I want you to talk to somebody else and get a second opinion on this, and I want you to be happy, and it doesn't sound like you're happy. So let's work on that."

Our relationship was full of moments like that, where I was lost and wanted to feel whole, and she was holding my hand. She did that through my entire childhood, up until the day she died.



What Kenny's reading

Women Don't Owe You Pretty by Florence Given

Trans Power: Own Your Gender by Juno Roche

Quit Like a Woman: The Radical Choice to Not Drink in a Culture Obsessed with Alcohol by Holly Whitaker

Your activism is based so much around your own experiences.

Do you feel the need to ever put up certain boundaries because of that? It's funny because when I first became an activist, I was, like, "I'll talk about anything. I don't care. Ask me anything, it's fine." And I had to build tough skin around people asking questions in a way that wasn't sensitive. But by the time I discuss something with the internet, I'm usually at a place where I can talk about it without being emotional. But on certain topics – for instance when I talk about my mum, she passed away three years ago – I give myself the space afterwards to be upset. However I'm going to feel after talking about something, I allow myself the space to really feel it.

If I were to take a quick scroll through your Instagram, I could find hundreds of messages from people, saying how your work has helped them. How does that make you feel? It's like a light to my soul. Honestly. There's something so special about knowing that you've helped, even if it's just informing people who aren't trans on how to better help trans people. A lot of the discrimination that happens to trans people is just on the basis that they've never met a trans person. But now when they meet a trans person, they're going to be equipped to understand their journey. And it's something I hold on to daily through times when it's hard to be an activist. This is why I keep going back, because of this. This has changed. **■**

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