

Columns | updated: 2/16/2016 10:15 AM

# 'Transparent' transgender actress bullied growing up in Schaumburg

## 'Transparent' star transitioned from suburban boy to Hollywood actress



---

Transgender actress Alexandra Billings, of Schaumburg, stars in "Transparent."



Jamie Sotonoff and Dann Gire

Being a transgender teen in Schaumburg in the 1970s was tough.

Few people understood how someone could feel trapped in the wrong body. There weren't any openly transgender people on TV or in the movies, much less any who hung out at Woodfield Mall.

So "Transparent" star and transgender actress Alexandra Billings (<http://www.alexandrabilings.com/>) -- who back then was a Schaumburg High School student named Scott Billings -- handled those confusing teen years by doing what came naturally: entertaining people on stage.

"I was very effeminate as a child, and I was extremely loud and I took up a lot of space. I sort of walked into a room and said, 'HELLO!'" Billings said. "We have rules about gender, about how little boys were supposed to act and sound. Nobody ever told me these rules. I broke all the rules accidentally, and it really upset people. I still upset people. Now, that tickles me. But back then, I wanted to assimilate."

Billings transitioned to a woman in 1980 at age 18 and began performing in Chicago drag clubs, including the famous Baton Show Lounge, where she went by the name Shanté. It would be the start of a groundbreaking career in theater, TV and movies. She became the first transgender woman to play a transgender character on television in the 2005 made-for-TV movie "Romy and Michele: In the Beginning" (which Billings jokingly advises not to bother watching).

Before that, she won several prestigious awards for her acting work at Chicago theaters, including productions at The Bailiwick and Steppenwolf theaters, and even did a one-woman autobiographical show that toured the country.

Hollywood soon came calling, casting her in dozens of TV shows and movies, including "Grey's Anatomy," "ER" and "Transparent."



Schaumburg native Alexandra Billings, right, of Schaumburg, stars in "Transparent." - courtesy of Amazon Studios

Billings' journey to stardom was a rocky one, though. Until she learned to love herself as a transgender actress, she faced many dark years of drug addiction, depression and prostitution. She was diagnosed with HIV in the 1980s. While initially fearing it was a death sentence, Billings has been successfully treated with medication.

"It's easy for trans people to sit in the darkness of the past or the regret of the future. I understand that. I did that. I tried to bottle it up with drugs and booze and sex, and believe me, you can only run from yourself for so long. Eventually, you catch up to you," she said in an [interview with The Heroines of My Life blog](http://theheroines.blogspot.com/2014/01/interview-with-alexandra-billings.html) (<http://theheroines.blogspot.com/2014/01/interview-with-alexandra-billings.html>).

She continued to perform, sing, teach, preach and advocate for LGBT causes, and it led her out of the darkness. Today, Billings says she is living happily in Los Angeles, married to her best friend from Schaumburg High, Chrisanne Blankenship, and is busy acting and teaching acting. Later this month she'll start shooting the third season of "Transparent," Amazon's Emmy Award-winning series where she plays Davina, the supportive friend of Maura (Jeffrey Tambor).

"My entire life has been one great, big, huge, happy accident," she told students during a rousing commencement speech (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hfOsS1CA0HY>) last summer at California State University in Long Beach, where she's an assistant professor.

As a kid, Billings bounced between her mom's house in Schaumburg (her mom was a teacher at Nathan Hale School) and California with her father, who was the music director for the L.A. Civic Light Opera House.

While Billings says she "had some wonderful times in Schaumburg," she was bullied for being a feminine male and struggled with a negative self-image, not realizing what being transgender was or how to handle it.

On a particularly bad day, Billings sat with a handful of pills, ready to commit suicide at age 16, when she saw Phil Donahue on TV interviewing drag queens. It was the first time she'd seen anyone who resembled her. It gave her hope.

So did two other influential men in her life -- her father, who encouraged her to act and sing, and Schaumburg choir teacher John Van Hook, who she said "changed the trajectory of my life as a performer."

"(Van Hook) told me, 'It's not how you're singing, it's about what you're singing.' That's never left me," she said.

Looking back, Billings, 53, said the only word that comes to mind about her life is "blessed." It also makes her think of a quote her dad used to say: "It's fine to look back at the past, as long as you don't stand there and stare at it."

-- Jamie Sotonoff

- Dann Gire and Jamie Sotonoff are always looking for people from the suburbs who are now working in showbiz. If you know of someone who would make an interesting feature, email them at [dgire@dailyherald.com](mailto:dgire@dailyherald.com) and [jsotonoff@dailyherald.com](mailto:jsotonoff@dailyherald.com).

