

Being Jazz

► CJ BOTT

An Interview with Jazz Jennings

Jazz Jennings has won the Youth Innovator award from the Trevor Project and the Colin Higgins Foundation's Youth Courage award; was named an Out 100; has spoken at GLAAD; was honored in the NYC Pride Parade; has met dozens of celebrities, musicians, and President Obama; was asked by Johnson & Johnson to help with a product concept; has written two books; started a **YouTube** channel; was interviewed by Barbara Walters and Oprah Winfrey, among others; and has her own TV series, now in season two. Amazing for someone who is fifteen years old.

cjb: As we work on this column, it is summer and you have some down time. Take us through a typical day.

Jazz: I wake up and work out or go to soccer practice. After that, I relax, watch TV, and play with my cats or my hedgehog, Kumi. Then, I may hang out with a friend and do something creative like create room decorations or short films. Then, I watch a TV show or movie with my parents. Lastly, I sleep! Pretty much like any kid my age.

cjb: You mentioned soccer; that was quite an issue for a while until you father stepped in and fought for your right to play—appealing all the way to the U.S. Soccer Federation. You must feel very supported by him.

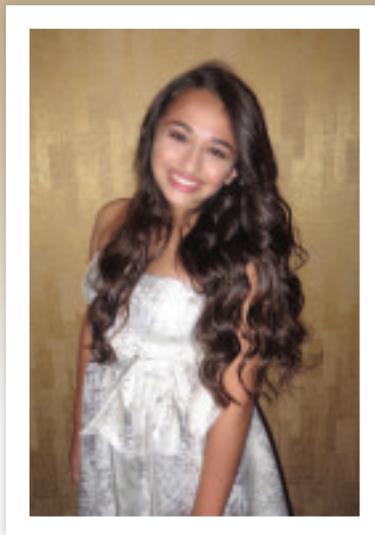
Jazz: My parents are incredible. They will do anything to secure happiness and equal treatment for both myself and all transgender kids. Soccer is my passion and being denied the right to participate in a sport where I found joy was damaging to my childhood. The fact that I can now play freely on the field is something I greatly attribute my parents.

cjb: Your family—your mom, dad, sister, and brothers—have been supportive of you in many ways. How has that helped you achieve all that you are?

Jazz: I wouldn't be the same person without their love and support. They know how thankful I am and how much I appreciate their roles in allowing me to blossom into my true self. In return, I have been able to show them that they have to be who they are, too. To remain authentic, they must always love themselves. Together as a family, we have been able to transition. They have always embraced who I am and told me to remain authentic instead of encouraging me to be something that I am not. Their support was fundamental in allowing me to define myself.

cjb: You are a talented artist and keep creating more options for yourself. Of all your artwork, which piece are you proudest of?

Jazz: My first short film called *Painting Leah*. It tells the story



of a male artist using his passion for painting and creativity to come out as transgender to his mom. I love TV shows and movies, so it was great to try it out for myself and discover if I could tell a good story.

cjb: I just watched it . . . incredibly beautiful, and the music is haunting. (Painting Leah can be accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wcw64uE2iy4>.)

cjb: My favorite photo in your book is in the two pages you have labeled "My Mermaid Evolution" (just before chapter 17), the photo of you in the purple-tailed mermaid costume with your brilliant smile. The caption says, "Being underwater with my mermaid tail makes me feel completely free." That is exactly how you look.

Jazz: I have always loved mermaids. From a young age, I was attracted to their beautiful and whimsical tails. At age seven, I began making fabric tails, and then by age twelve, I started to create silicone mermaid tails. I just love being able to enter another world underwater and feel like the mystical creature that I have always admired.



cjb: Do you ever wish you could escape for fifteen minutes or even a day? Could you share with us a little about where you go—physically or mentally—when you need to relax, breathe deeply, and find a little peace and maybe some fun?

Jazz: I have more free time than people think. The times that I am not doing advocacy work, I am getting my "Jazz Time" by just binge-watching TV shows on my laptop. I don't ever feel too pressured because I know that this movement for equality isn't just about me—it's about the entire community. I know that we are doing this united, hand in hand, all playing our parts to make a difference.

cjb: Grandma Jacky ends your book by saying, "My wish for Jazz is that she will be in a kinder place with what she is accomplishing." Years from now, what is your hope for transgender youth in school and for society's attitude toward transgender people?

Jazz: I just hope that we can be treated equally, respected, and accepted for who we are. Transgender individuals are people just trying to find happiness and love during our short time on Earth. So let's do that—let us find our happiness. Because at the end of the day, we wish for everyone to find that happiness as well.

cjb: Thank you, Jazz. ■

cj bott, teacher and writer, loves bringing great books and great people together.



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