

“Authentic,” “imperfect” and “chaotic:” Willow Yeaman talks drag, identity and coming out

The USC senior discusses what performing – on stage and in her personal life – means to her.



Photo courtesy of Willow Yeaman.

By Alyssa Peccatiello

USC acting student by day, drag queen Willconique by night. Willow Yeaman navigates life as a senior in college and transgender woman.

“Authentic,” “imperfect” and “chaotic” are three words she’d use to describe herself.

Yeaman channels glamor in her life as a performer, despite the toll it’s taken on her well-being. In performing as a drag queen, juggling schoolwork and finding her true self, Yeaman has experienced the risks and rewards of the life of a showgirl.

Yeaman, a San Jose native, came out as gay at the age of 17. Less than six months ago, she came out in a heartfelt video on her social media as a transgender woman.

“In San Jose, [there’s] not a lot of queer people,” said Yeaman. “I never met anybody who was trans in person there. It’s not as diverse as people think.”

Yeaman found her passion for performing arts since studying acting at USC and crafting her drag persona, Willconique. Yeaman began working as a drag queen before her transition and quickly met other trans people who have supported her.

She participates in USC’s drag shows with other drag queens and kings on campus, and she will be hosting the school’s next show this February.

“I met trans people in doing drag and being in West Hollywood. I have a whole community of trans people and sisters,” said Yeaman. “Seeing that it was a viable lifestyle made me realize okay, I can do this... It made me less afraid.”



Yeaman explained that drag combines all her favorite interests: performance, dance, comedy, fashion, cosmetics and hair. She also described the “toxic relationship” that developed once the curtain closed and she didn’t want to go back to being herself.

“I liked the female fantasy. I wanted that,” said Yeaman.

She also found that the highs of life as a drag queen resulted in major consequences for her personal and academic well-being.

“Being so young and in that scene... I was definitely exposed to some things that I shouldn’t have been,” said Yeaman.

She admitted to having struggled with drugs and alcohol, which were easily accessible in the drag environment, and which impacted her mental health.

Yeaman took gigs from 10:00 P.M. to 2:00 A.M. that impacted her sleep schedule. She faced three at-risks of failing last semester from the toll of working too many late nights.

“I was so unhappy. I wasn’t respecting my life,” said Yeaman. “I was disregarding my safety and my well-being.”

Reaching her lowest, struggling with substance abuse and her identity living as a man, Yeaman made the change she knew she needed – coming out as a woman.



Living a double life in drag as Willconique provided a sort of glimpse into what life as a woman could be like.

“Transitioning is a major performance, too. It’s very performative,” she said. “You’re using hair and makeup and clothing to construct a vision of yourself.”

Yeaman came out publicly via Instagram in a personal video rather than telling everyone around her individually.

“It wasn’t hard because I kind of presented that I was trans,” she said. “I’ve always been feminine, even as a gay guy.”

After coming out, Yeaman said her family and friends were supportive. However, her coming out received some negative comments from her 18-year-old brother’s friends back home, whom she heard were circulating photos of her and giving her brother a hard time.

Yeaman still feels confident posting about her life on social media and promoting her drag work and she follows other transgender influencers she's inspired by.

"I think I would be a fabulous influencer if I had a platform," she said. "I think I was born to share my story and be public and entertain and make a difference."



Looking ahead to future career options, Yeaman hopes to start booking commercial acting jobs as a means of supporting herself and what she calls her "high-maintenance" lifestyle apart from drag gigs.

"Whatever I do, it's got to be something I enjoy because I won't settle for less," said Yeaman. "I won't do something that I'm not passionate about."

As she rounds out her time at USC, Yeaman looks ahead to continuing her medical transition. She admitted that "being trans is hard early on" and that she still struggles with seeing the more masculine parts of her appearance.

"It's new and I'm learning and it's going to be a long journey, but the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step," she said.