

gender bender

Sarah Duncan



Shot: Raffaele Persichetti

kathy

now



then



Shot: Kelly Hussey-Smith

dion

The eight-year-old's name was Rachel. She sat at the edge of the sandpit, legs slightly apart, and took in a deep breath. She was about to confess something to me, which she had never hinted to anyone before. Rachel was my best friend. We were both in grade three, tomboyish in appearance and even more so in behaviour. She had dark brown hair cut just below her earlobes and a thick, blunt fringe. We were both wearing the male version of our school uniforms: collared shirts, blue tracksuit pants and a cap with our hair tucked in at the sides. "I'm going to ask mum if I can have a sex change," she said in a cautiously confident tone. "Really?" I replied, not really knowing what to say. "Yeah, I just don't think I'm really a girl. I was meant to be born a boy."

At the time I didn't completely understand what Rachel was experiencing. I too wore boys clothing and played sport, but unlike Rachel I was not dealing with feelings of confusion or dissatisfaction with my body. I enjoyed being perceived as a boy or even as a girl dressed as a boy but not once had I questioned whether I was in the right body. Rachel, like many others in Australia, experienced a sense of confusion about his assigned gender. His sex was female but he identified as male.

For those of you whose understanding of transgender comes from watching Jerry Springer, transgender is an umbrella term which includes the whole trans-community, but can also refer to someone who takes on an appearance different from their birth sex without surgery. Those who want or need to physically change their bodies through the use of surgery are considered to be transsexual. The trans-community includes Transsexuals, Cross-dressers, Hermaphrodites, Pangender, Drag Queens, Drag Kings and a range of others.

The University of Queensland's Queer Officer, Dionysius Reid, a female to male (FTM) transgender man, says his early youth was permeated with conflicted feelings about his gender. **As a little girl, Dion wanted, amongst other things, to become a male construction worker.** "I guess the realisation that people were seeing me as something that I was not happened when I was about six years old," Dion says. "Looking back though, even when I was two years old, there were signs."

The process of transition is a complex, emotional and often painful transformation. "If you wish to change your body, the process can take up to five years," Dion says.

"A lot of my best memories are little things to do with my body, like... the first time I got called a guy by a stranger, and the first time I went into the guy's changing rooms, and I was accepted totally as a guy."

Kathy Anne Noble, 72, founder and president of the transsexual support group Changeling Aspects and a male to female (MTF) transsexual woman herself, says Australian transgendered people are still afraid to 'out' themselves. "We have a big problem with people going into what we call 'stealth'," Kathy says. "They will not come out and declare themselves and this is why we are so far behind in having our rights recognised." Transgendered people are active in almost every walk of life and profession, including doctors, lawyers, theologians, pilots and IT professionals. "We've even got one who is now a nun and we've got another one who's a pastor," Kathy says.

Until late 2002, Queensland remained the only Australian State or Territory which did not address transgender discrimination. It was not until the *Discrimination Law Amendment Act 2002* that 'gender identity' became an explicitly illegal ground for discrimination in Queensland. But despite the legislative changes and the pervasiveness of transgendered people in society, bashings, assaults and vilification are still, according to Kathy, an uncomfortably regular occurrence. "West End seems to be OK, but The Valley, no. We advise people to stay out of there," Kathy says. Dion shares similar concerns: "A lack of understanding about transgender issues makes many aspects of Brisbane life difficult for us trans-people. "I've been told on more than one occasion by medical professionals that their hospital won't treat me for 'ethical reasons'."

For a person to be prescribed hormone therapy medication and considered for Sex Reassignment Surgery (SRS) they must satisfy more than one doctor's analysis to ensure that they are genuinely experiencing a sense of unhappiness with their gender identity. This is often called gender dysphoria, which is classified as a "disorder" in the internationally recognised and widely used Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), a publication that regarded homosexuality as a "mental disorder" until 1974.

Rachael Wallbank, a parent, a MTF transsexual and an Accredited Specialist in family law, says a feeling of unhappiness with physical gender is anything but a 'disorder'. "People with transsexualism will tell you they

have never had gender dysphoria or any confusion or unhappiness with or between their sexual or gender identities," Rachel says.

"On the contrary, the experience of transsexualism is the experience of certainty and congruity as to both one's sexual and gender identities. "I deplore the inclusion of transsexualism in the Manual or its categorization as a pathology or mental illness."

In Australia, SRS is an expensive operation that must be paid for by the patient. In England, transgendered people are slightly more fortunate; the surgery is paid for by the National Health System, but the wait can be up to seven years, which for many can be a dangerously long time. "Depression is very common [among pre-op transgendered people]... a lot of them will get so depressed that they will top themselves," Kathy says. "For some, death is far more preferable. "A lot of them actually take a blade to their testicles and cut them off while they sit on the loo and flush them away so they can never be put back. **"Some of them even cut their penis off and bleed to death.** "I've known of FTMs who have actually tried to take their breasts off... it's like a time bomb of angst."

Gender reassignment surgeon Dr Peter Haertsch, one of only two reassignment surgeons in Australia, says the path to surgery is deliberately difficult because it involves such major and permanent life changes. "Prior to surgery [a person] must provide two independent psychiatric evaluations that indicate clearly that this surgery is appropriate for them. "Patients also have to demonstrate a commitment to manage their lives, and the distress they have experienced, through a permanent change of gender role and a change of their genital-sex status. "The surgical goal is to comfort and assist the patient to achieve an improvement in their quality of life."

The stories of transgendered people can be immensely distressing, disheartening and are almost always painful. But there are signs of improvement. Community activists like Kathy Anne Noble, Dionysius Reid and Rachael Wallbank are pushing for recognition and equality for transgendered people. "I would love for those who come after us to be in a situation where they don't have to worry about being transsexual; they don't need to worry about having a choice," Kathy says. "They should be able to make that choice, not somebody else making it for them. Hopefully it will come."