

gender fluid

Story by Lisa Walls

Transgender folk are travelers who crisscross our gendered planet. Some people straddle the equator, staking territory in the land of genderqueer, refusing to move north or south. Others cross the line, striding toward their chosen pole wearing bright colors. A few purposefully don camouflage, going "stealth."

Some cultures acknowledge and even celebrate their transgender citizens, believing they represent a third gender. But mainstream Western society is so wedded to gender roles that it slaps a pathology on anyone who moves too far into gendered lands without the formal male or female passport we're all handed at birth.

Seattle remains one of the best cities for the trans-identified. We have a pioneer of the transgender civil rights movement residing in the area. Marsha Botzer, a long-time activist and de facto grandmother to the trans community, founded the Ingersoll Gender Center

in the '70s. "The idea behind Ingersoll came from the '60s," she explained. "Nothing falls from the sky ready made. If you want it, you make it yourself. Over time, I've learned you actually make it together, with other people." No surprise Marsha witnessed the May 1968 Paris revolution.

Named for Robert G. Ingersoll, a 19th century forward-thinking politician who advocated for, among other things, women's right to vote, the Gender Center continues the spirit of his work. "He was an amazing voice for freedom," said Marsha.

Following the model created in the '70s by Seattle Counseling Service, the organization organized transgender support groups and referred people to empathic medical professionals. Marsha created a cadre of doctors and therapists interested in serving a trans clientele. "I'd go to the University of Washington and invite Master's- and PhD-level therapists in for training," she said.

"We're a model for other centers," said Marsha. "We've encouraged, birthed, and supported other organizations who've spun off from us or used our model and let 10,000 groups bloom." The Center, which gained nonprofit status in 1984, offers a menu of services for the trans-identified.

COMING OUT

Certain themes emerge as trans people talk about developing an awareness of gender. From a young age, even without the language to describe their feelings, many had a sense that something didn't quite fit. As a five-year-old boy, Marsha looked in at a group of her mother's friends socializing and wondered: Why am I not like they are?

Breanna, a 50-year-old transwoman who came out at age 33, reports, "At five I was busted getting into my cousin's dress. My mom caught me. I pled with her not to tell anybody. I knew it wasn't okay—I grew up in a religious household."

Davey, a transgender college student, said, "from a very young age most if not all of my friends were boys. The things we did together were masculinely gendered—we played with tanks and trains." But, he said, "trans-specific vocabulary didn't come into my head until I was 19 or 20."



PHOTO CREDIT: MALCOLM SMITH

Marsha Botzer



PHOTO CREDIT: MALCOLM SMITH

Aleksa Manila

Aleksa, a 32-year-old health educator, mentioned feeling different at four or five years of age. "I remember being at the playground, and I had this feeling while watching the other kids. I thought, 'Am I a boy or a girl?'" By age eight Aleksa was wearing her mom's clothes and shoes (but knew better than to dress up when her mom was home). As a drag queen, Aleksa identifies as transgender but not transsexual. "I know I am man and woman. I have friends asking me, 'When are you going to transition?' I tell them, 'No. I'm okay.' I enjoy the challenge of going back and forth."

"There's a lot of fun to be had in exploring gender expression," said Marsha. More people today are embracing that playfulness, enjoying the grey area between male and female. Community activist Airen Lydick runs the sup-

lately; it's awesome. It was a fun game for a bunch of years to see how people perceived me. Then it got boring. I go by female pronouns at work." Walker is employed as a counselor for Downtown Emergency Services.

But no constant around gender identity exists, even among youth. Airen has heard some gender variant young people say they don't feel like their gender is fluid. "It's tricky," he said. "I think there's a tendency with gender variance—when it's been assigned as a psychological disorder from the DSM IV—for language to get boiled down into what's been said the loudest. I think it's a little limiting, because gender is so varied for all people."

And though he's young, Davey says he's "always been masculine identified." He came out as a lesbian before transitioning, yet "very rarely used the term 'lesbian' to describe myself. I used 'dyke' or 'butch.' Maybe that was foreshadowing."

Davey mentioned the "trans narrative" that people repeat to doctors as they jump through hoops to gain access to hormones and surgery, which include memories of not fitting in, playing with "boy" toys, or wearing a sister's clothes. "These incidents become focal points of the trans narrative," said Davey. "But it doesn't always leave room to talk about conflicted feelings."

TRANSITIONING AND BEYOND

For non-trans queers, being "in transition" usually means you're between jobs, housing, or relationships. If you're trans-identified, the term takes on an entirely different meaning. The medical establishment acts as a gatekeeper for people seeking hormones or surgery.

Danielle Askini, a young transwoman who works as the transgender health coordinator at Verbena, described the process: "For three to six months you see a Master's-level therapist. They'll evaluate you and write a letter to your primary care physician (PCP) saying that you're diagnosed with Gender Identity Disorder. You go to your PCP with the letter, get blood work and a routine physical. It takes about a month to get labs back. Your PCP will start you on a low dose of hormones and



Danielle Askini

taper up. You take hormones for a year; you transition for the rest of your life."

A transwoman wanting bottom surgery (vaginoplasty) would get a new letter after 12 months of hormone therapy from her original therapist, and another letter from a psychiatrist or PhD psychologist. She would take those letters, along with the PCP's letter, to her surgeon of choice. Transmen wanting top surgery (chest reconstruction)—most don't opt for bottom—aren't required to take testosterone for a year. A letter from a therapist is enough.

Insurance covers none of these endeavors, unless you're lucky enough to work for one of the few companies whose policies do pay: Microsoft, Boeing, Nintendo, and Amazon. If you want surgery, and you're fortunate in having coverage for surgery and/or hormones, it's still a challenge to find supportive healthcare.

"Most doctors don't know how to deal with transgender people," said Danielle. "Because of cultural bigotry and discrimination, people very frequently take matters into their own hands." Self-administering hormones can be an incredibly dangerous proposition, especially for smokers. "Smoking increases the risk of blood clots, strokes, and heart attacks; it's a huge risk. Most doctors won't give you a full dose of hormones if you smoke. I had a 45-year-old friend who smoked heavily. She was on hormones for three years. She had a stroke and died. She was a big activist and it was a total loss. Of the trans people I see, about 70% smoke." Verbena has an "Out to Quit" program with a 100% success rate for those who commit to all sessions, which entail

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Davey Wilkes

port group at Lambert House for trans-identified youth. He said, "people in their 30s and older are more tied to standard definitions of gender. They think there are two genders and they were assigned the wrong one. Younger folks don't subscribe to two genders. They see multiple genders and don't think they're one or the other."

Genderqueer-identified Walker Lewis talks about how she "mostly gets read as female," but about 25 to 30 percent of the time she's 'read' as male. "I've been getting 'sirred' a lot

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weekly peer support groups, education, and nicotine replacement therapy.

How far people travel vis-à-vis their transitions depends on a myriad of reasons. Some spend tens of thousands on surgery—top and bottom—even a “facial feminization” procedure. For others, hormones are enough, especially if they move easily through the world in their chosen gender. Others eschew both hormones and surgery. Some transmen bind their breasts, wear masculine clothes, adopt masculine mannerisms and use a male name. How wonderfully subversive that there are men strolling around this city with detachable dicks, and women in heels whose penises are still attached.

A few mentioned the cost of surgery, and what it would mean to dedicate that much money to their bodies. When asked what she'd do if someone handed her \$30,000 dollars, one young woman who hasn't had bottom surgery said, “Pay off my student loans!” A thoughtful transman said, “I don't need bottom surgery to be perceived as male. For me, it's a complicated issue. When I try to subtract the money, it becomes about resources.”

Gender is complicated; people who aren't trans-identified can be perceived as something they're not. Heather, a non-trans, queer-identified graduate student, said, “I get called 'sir' at least once a week in Seattle. Women's bathrooms have become a place of trepidation. I consciously unzip my jacket before I walk into a bathroom.” She motioned to her chest. “Look at the boobs! Bathrooms should be all-gender.”

TRANNY BLADDER

By necessity, transgender individuals develop strong bladders. Public bathrooms can be dangerous places. Those outside our culture's idea of what's considered “gender normative” might be bashed, harassed, stared at, confronted by security guards, or hear shouts of, “What are you doing in the women's room?!”

Before he had top surgery, one young transguy developed a sixth sense for the traffic in his school's men's rooms. “I'd have to re-do my binding in the middle of the day. I'd find a stall to do that. I could tell you how busy certain bathrooms are during which times of the day.”

There are social cues for men's rooms. Said one quick learner: “There are rules about

which stall or urinal you go to depending on how many men are in the bathroom. It's about doing your business and getting out. It doesn't have the social aspect the women's room tends to have.” Unless you're being cruised.

“SEX IS FUCKING AND GENDER IS EVERYTHING ELSE.” – KATE BORNSTEIN

Gender identity (how you want to be perceived on the street) and sexual orientation (who turns your head on the street) are entirely separate concepts. Spencer Bergstedt, a lawyer who was quite active in Seattle's queer community before he transitioned, said post-transition, “I dated from the same pool of femme-identified women. Because I'd been in fairly visible positions in the community, after I transitioned, people knew. I didn't have to do a lot of disclosure. I keep telling my wife she can't die or leave me. I don't want to have to date again. From transguys I know who are single and dating, disclosure is an issue.”



PHOTO CREDIT: MICHAEL LEHMAN

Spencer Bergstedt

Some transmen who date women maintain a queer identity. Others don't. Everyone stressed that while no transgender person should be required to maintain a queer identity, it does help to “mentor younger generations” and that “it's tough for the activist world when they go away.”

Perhaps Walker most eloquently summed up queer identity when she stated, “What

the fuck does it matter what's between my legs?” Walker's head turns for “mostly other genderqueer folks.” She paused and qualified her taste. “Women and transfolks. Particularly genderqueer folks who don't identify as transguys, who are just sort of androgynous.”

“Queer” neatly packages the most complicated of sexualities and identities. Surveys show many older gays and lesbians don't like the term, but Marsha embraces it. “If our language can't keep up or reflect what's really happening than it might as well only live in textbooks,” she said.

FAMILY

Explaining to family that the gender you were assigned at birth isn't the one you want to keep can be difficult. Parents' reactions range from disowning their kids to loaning money for surgery. Most are somewhere in the middle. Airen Lydick, trans-identified for 10 years, described his parents' reaction: “You know the cycles of grief? My parents have done some of that. They're definitely accepting and welcome me to be at home and part of the family.” Airen was raised in a small farming town, where families remain for generations.

But his parents are still puzzled about his wanting to be male. “Early on,” he said, “I got the impression they thought it was some strange urban phenomenon I got sucked into. Because I'm from a culture that doesn't have mainstream expectations about femininity, it's confusing to them that I would feel the need to change to be male.”

Aleksa said, “My mom supports me. The first time I won a drag title she said, ‘I'm very happy for you. I'm glad you're doing something that makes your heart warm.’ She takes the time to understand what I'm going through. My brothers and I are from the Philippines, which has a machismo culture. When they found out I was gay they were okay with it, but when I came out as trans they had a harder time.”

EMPLOYMENT CONSIDERATIONS

Transitioning on the job can sometimes lead to the unemployment line. Davey was fired from a telemarketing job when he transitioned. Others are luckier; Spencer came out to his clients via a letter and didn't lose any of them.

For Breanna, who worked at a small software company when she transitioned, the process was "painful." She said, "I was director of research and they took away the people I managed. Suddenly I wasn't needed in meetings. Then I wasn't needed at conferences. Before, I'd been a keynote speaker. I hunkered down and waited til surgery." Breanna regained her post when the company had a management crisis. Employees asked upper management to bring her back as a director. "It took the people I'd supervised telling my boss to get over it," she said.

WHEN GETTING AN 'F' IS A GOOD THING

Changing the gender marker on one's driver's license, passport, or birth certificate is a chore. Up until two years ago in Washington, all a person needed to transform an 'M' to an 'F' was a name-change order and an order from a therapist or a doctor. Then the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) changed that law without any input from the transgender community. Currently, the DMV will only accept an order from a doctor, and the order has to verify that the driver is undergoing treatment or has already transitioned.

Spencer and other transgender activists have been meeting with the DMV to change its policy. "Now they want to impose even more restrictive rules," he said. "The most recent proposal was that they were going to require an amended birth certificate, which is not only harder but sometimes impossible." Some states won't amend information on birth certificates they've issued. Washington state will.

ENDA, HRC, AND ERW

As of 2007, our state has protections in place for employees who transition. Equal Rights Washington (ERW) lobbied and campaigned relentlessly for the anti-discrimination bill's passage. At the national level, the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) split with ERW and hundreds of other LGBT advocacy groups when it supported passage of the Employment Nondiscrimination Act (ENDA) without trans-inclusive language.

"ERW worked early to have transgender inclusive language in the bill," said Josh Friedes, ERW's advocacy director. "When it became public that only lesbian and gay people would be included, ERW campaigned for inclusion of gender-identity language. 14,000 people

contacted their legislators [in support of inclusion]."

Spencer Bergstedt said, "I think HRC clearly betrayed not only the trans community but the LGB community they allegedly serve. HRC's decision to move forward without inclusive language is shortsighted. The majority of lesbians and gays who face employment discrimination are effeminate gay men or masculine lesbians. They're violating gender normative behavior. Without the inclusion of gender identity, employers can say, 'We're fine with lesbians, but we like it when they're pretty and wear makeup.' They'll still fire someone but will couch it in language that's other than sexual orientation."

Last November ENDA passed the House without trans-inclusive language. "Culture rarely goes back for those left behind," said Marsha. Ironically, she's a past recipient of an HRC leadership award.


A group of trans activists recently formed the Washington Transgender Equality Project, in conjunction with ERW, to talk about educating agency officials and legislators on county and state laws that affect transfolk. "It got started largely out of concerns about the driver's license issue," said Spencer.

TRANS-PARENT

Seattle's a good city (in a great state) for queer parents. We have second-parent adoption and a domestic partnership registration. Marriage equality is imminent. Children growing up with trans-identified parents are likely allowed greater self-expression regarding gender and sexuality. The result? A transwoman who transitioned when her three children were aged six, eight, and nine reports that as young adults "they see the world with so much more clarity than their peers. They can take every person as an individual. I'm glad my kids had a more diverse and accepting upbringing than I did. They're able to see life as it is."

Avery Powell, a young transman who parents twin toddlers with his partner, said he plans on being out to his children when they're older. "I don't believe in keeping it a secret. They've always known me as their father. I think it's more damaging for them not to know. They may be upset but it's nothing we can't work through. It's not something I'm ashamed of so why should they be ashamed?"

We're all travelers on this planet for a short time. Whether we're parents, activists, educators, advocates, or some combination thereof,

we have much to learn from each other. Transgender people know life from both sides of the gender line, gaining a wisdom from which we can all benefit. Like the equator, gender is a human construct—it's a convenient landmark—but like all lines, it can be redrawn. 

TRANSGENDER RESOURCES

Healthcare

Verbena Health
www.verbenahealth.org

Seattle Counseling Services
www.seattlecounseling.org

Direct Advocacy

American Civil Liberties Union of Washington State
www.aclu-wa.org

Northwest Women's Law Center
www.nwwlc.org

Lambda Legal
www.lambdalegal.org

General

Ingersoll Gender Center
www.ingersollcenter.org

Home Alive
www.homealive.org

Transgender Law and Policy Institute
www.transgenderlaw.org

Transgender Law Center
www.transgenderlawcenter.org

National Gay and Lesbian Task Force
www.thetaskforce.org

Gender Odyssey
www.transconference.org

On the Web

Transsexual Road Map
www.tsroadmap.com

FTM International
www.ftmi.org

Make Me A Boy
www.makemeaboy.org

Seattle Transgender
www.seattletransgender.org