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Transgender people step out, risk ridicule, worse

Jobs, friends, families at risk, but transgender people take chance to understand themselves and be understood.

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Little is widely or completely understood about why transgender people have gender identity conflicts.

What is unknown evokes fear, and fear provokes a negative reaction. It becomes a vicious circle as transgender people often hide their need to dress or live as a gender opposite the one they were identified as at birth.

"People are deeply closeted because of the extreme amount of ridicule," said Jenny Caden, who was born male but began living as a woman full time six months ago.

And there is much to fear.

Jobs, friends, marriages and families sometimes are lost.

James Burgess understands how powerful the fear is because he's experienced it from both sides.

Burgess, a local retired electrical engineer, is married and a heterosexual cross-dresser. He is analytical, intellectual and willing to talk about being a cross-dresser because he's dedicated to better education about transgender issues.

And he's honest. While seeking a high security clearance for work at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, he was asked what would happen if somebody outed him as a cross-dresser. He said, "Go ahead and let them try."

He got his clearance.

But Burgess also remembers his first transgender conference in 1965.

"I was fearful," he said. "I didn't know what to expect. I didn't know if I was going to meet Hell's Angels looking for a guy in a dress or what. I was worried about people not respecting my boundaries."

Burgess said fear is the main reason transgender people avoid being "outed" and why others sometimes react negatively. But secrecy breeds further misunderstanding

"The secrecy prevents us from understanding ourselves or getting understanding from others," he said. "We need to connect, to share ideas. But classically, everybody learns to hide things about themselves they realize won't be accepted. And then we can't get the answers we need."

Dr. Frederick Peterson, a Dayton-area sex therapist, Wright State University professor and author, said gender identity conflicts are classified in the "Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV," as "gender dysphoria," but counseling focuses on helping the patient deal with the stress of their difference.

"This is not a mental illness," Peterson said. "It's in the book — but if you smoke, that's nicotine dependence, and you're in the book, too. There are a lot of things in the DSM-IV that aren't really mental illnesses."

Estimates of the transgender population are just estimates. Lynn Conway, a computer scientist, electrical engineer and professor, as well as a transsexual woman, has done extensive research and believes it is at about 6 percent of all males and three percent of females.

Conway's data indicates two categories make up about 95 percent of transgender people — cross-dressers and transsexuals.

Cross-dressing

Cross-dressers, who dress and present as a gender other than the one they were born with, constitute the majority of all transgender persons.

Cross-dressers can be of either sex and any sexual orientation, but Conway estimates that more than 90 percent are heterosexual males, often married with families, who dress as women.

The frequency and type of cross-dressing behavior varies enormously — from very occasional to daily, from wearing a single item of clothing to being fully decked out with hair and makeup.

A cross-dresser's need to sometimes dress as the opposite sex seems to be innate and powerful, but they are also comfortable with the gender identity associated with their biological sex.

At 79, Burgess has had plenty of time to think about what his cross-dressing means — and he has.

"You never get perfect answers, but as you get older, you do get better ones," he said.

Twice married, the father of three believes cross-dressing is an example of Carl Jung's theories of the unconscious shadow self seeking expression. He says that plays out in traditional romantic relationships too, as people project denied parts of themselves onto others and fall in love.

"For whatever reason, transgender people become consciously aware of that unconscious self," he said.

Burgess said dealing with being transgender is not only difficult and confusing for the individual, but for friends and family, especially spouses.

"The spouse is involved, they have their own fears and feelings and it can be really bad for them," he said. "Many do divorce, although it often seems they somehow end up being best friends."

Burgess said cross-dressing was an issue in his first marriage, but something he and his current wife have been able to work through.

"I think for me it was always about the need to connect with the feminine," he said. "I seem to have found the connection I sought with my current wife. I would argue that our marriage has been about growth for both of us."

Transsexuals

Like cross-dressers, transsexuals assume an opposite sex gender identity because that's who they feel they truly are.

Like cross-dressers, they can be of any sexual orientation or biological sex, but most often are male.

For transsexuals, sometimes dressing in opposite gender clothing is usually not enough. They are not comfortable as their birth sex and feel "trapped in the wrong body."

They usually desire and often seek some kind of permanent physical modification, including hormonal treatment, cosmetic and/or genital reassignment surgery, or some combination.

Caden, a software engineer, legally changed her name and made the leap to life as a woman six months ago.

Born and raised in the Dayton area, she's been married, has two adult children, and once worked as a volunteer paramedic.

Her journey from being known as a man to being accepted as a woman has been a mixture of joy and panic, and she still doesn't know how it all ends.

"You get so scared," she said. "So much has been unexpected. I thought my sister would do better with it and my parents worse, and it's been the opposite. My kids have been supportive. We decided they still call me Dad. That's who I am to them, and no amount of surgery changes that."

There have been bright spots — Caden was a contract worker at NCR, a company she says is very supportive of diversity and the best possible work environment she could have had as she began transition.

Caden continues with psychological and hormonal therapy. Medical protocol requires a full year of living as a woman before genital reassignment surgery can be done.

And life goes on as usual in other ways. Her contract with NCR recently expired, and she worries about finding another job.

"If you do this on a whim or think it's going to solve all of life's problems, you're going to be very disappointed," she said. "But am I happier as Jenny? Absolutely. I can now do something I wasn't able to in my entire previous 55 years of life — like myself."

Out

While transgender people may not be prevalent, they are becoming more visible and connected, particularly in the Internet age. In 2007, a number of high-profile cases came to public attention.

Locally, Steven Cole, who allegedly sometimes cross-dressed, was arrested in a Mason park in a bikini and blonde wig. There were also charges of intoxication, with the public indecency charges later dropped in a plea agreement. But Cole, married with children, lost his full-time job as a Waynesville volunteer firefighter.

Steve Stanton, city manager of Largo, Fla., began to become Susan, thinking he had a plan mapped out that would satisfy his employers. But Stanton lost his job, and as Susan, according to a recent story in the St. Petersburg Times, is still unemployed.

Mike Penner, sportswriter for the Los Angeles Times, publicly disclosed to readers his intention of becoming Christine Daniels. As Christine, Penner is still a sportswriter and also blogs about her experiences as a transsexual woman.

The state of Ohio and the city of Dayton both recently passed legislation barring employment discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity, but that only covers state or city employees. In Ohio's private sector, there is no protection against firings for sexual orientation or gender identity, whether

the behavior is discovered on or off the job.

A federal law prohibiting employment discrimination by sexual orientation originally included gender identity, but it was dropped from protection in the latest version passed by the House in November.

"We did a poll, and Ohioans seem to be comfortable with passing laws that protect employment for both," said Bo Shuff, director of education and public policy at Equality Ohio. "As people become more familiar with what it means, they seem to become more comfortable with eliminating discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity."

Why?

"Everybody always wants to know why," Caden said. "They'll say, can't you cure this, give him a pill, make it go away? Sorry — doesn't work that way."

Theories abound, even among the transgender community. What does seem likely is that there is some kind of biological or neurological influence, but no one knows for sure.

Peterson said the professional view of transgender has shifted from "perversity to diversity." He said it's become clear that biological sex, gender identity and sexual orientation are variables, and not always fixed in a particular sequence.

"We're moving from an old school full of sexual folklore and myths to more of a new school of sexual science," he said. "That's really moved us towards conceiving there are many different valid expressions once considered outside the range of normal."

Caden said family and friends can often adjust, once they realize that the person living or dressing as another gender doesn't change everything else about them.

"In most ways, we are still the same people they knew before," Caden said. "People are afraid of what they don't understand, but the way to fix that is education."

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