

The Young Lady Who Beat The Odds

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Written by Charl Marais

Transsexuality is an infant phenomenon in South Africa and though much research has gone into it, there is a great lack of information on this condition. This came at a high price for Jennifer* who endured sodomy and humiliation at the hands of other teens looking for her "hidden vagina". This is the story of a courageous young lady who beat the odds and overcame adversities to live a life others find fascinating … this is Jennifer's* story. Upon meeting Jennifer, I was taken aback by how femininely she comes across. It is evident this 28 year old pays particular attention to fashion sense and grooming. Jennifer was born in January 1982 as a male child. Jennifer always knew she was different and remembers having a strong desire to wear dresses like the cousin she grew up with. Though identifying with traits and habits from the opposite gender from a young age, Jennifer was reminded sternly by her family, friends and peers that she has to behave in line with what society determined to be "male behaviour".

"I was often reminded in the harshest way that I was still a boy and had to behave as such," Jennifer says. "I was beat often, both at home and school, from a very young age". This clearly did not put off this determined woman. She says that adversities became challenges on which she firmly stood her ground.

The biggest challenge for Jennifer was being born and raised in a small town in the Eastern Cape. "Growing up in the rural Eastern Cape presented unique challenges in that there was no information regarding my situation. Up to the age of fifteen, I did not even know what this phenomenon was called. The only thing that was very clear to me was the desire to become a woman".

Her situation was very controversial both at school and at home. Jennifer assigns this controversy to the fact that people did not understand her situation. Circumstances worsened for Jennifer in 1999 when her sister was murdered. She subsequently moved to Cape Town to live with her cousin.

While it was a culture shock having to adapt in the big city, it was good to have the opportunity to expand her knowledge of this condition in a city with people who seemed more knowledgeable. Her new school presented many new challenges and she found it difficult to fit in. The "gay crowd" was not very accepting and "the normal" kids did not understand her situation. As a result she ended up being pushed from one group to the other.

Despite all this, she graduated from high school and gained admission to university to pursue a degree with the scholarship she was awarded. Her doctor referred her to the Grootte Schuur Hospital where she was assessed for surgery. It was yet another set back for Jennifer when the surgical programme at Groote Schuur Hospital did not materialise due to lack of funding and surgical skills.

A very determined Jennifer continued to research the possibility of having surgery of this kind in South Africa. It took her another six years before a surgeon from East London referred her to the multi-disciplinary team of specialists that run the gender reassignment clinic at the Steve Biko Academic Hospital in Pretoria.

Dr. Colin is the psychiatric specialist who evaluates patients for admission to this clinic. In doing so, he relies on the "Harry Benjamin Gender Disphoria International Standards of Care". "This involves a series of psychiatric tests to determine whether a patient's psychiatric faculty is consistent with that of transsexuality", says Dr Colin.

He goes on to cite stigma as the number one reason why family, friends, colleagues, partners and children reject people with transgenderism. After consultation with Dr. Colin, Jennifer was referred back to the surgical team at the Steve Biko Academic Hospital. Here, she was told she could not have surgery right away because of a weight problem.

"Even though this felt like a set back for me, I was glad to meet other transsexual people at the clinic". On her visit to the gender reassignment clinic, she met another transsexual female who put her in touch with Gender Dynamix, a human rights organisation advocating for the rights of transgender and intersex people. Jennifer now advocates for the rights of people in similar situations, motivated by the history of her own experiences, combined with listening to other transsexual people's inspiring stories. "Transsexual people battle with their everyday existence, from administrative matters like applying for a passport or opening a bank account to the prejudice and judgment of society".

Caroline Bowley, project manager at Gender Dynamix says: "Society expects everyone to fit into the binary of male and female. You are expected to dress according to certain norms, perform certain roles and do certain types of activities. Transgender people violate these expectations in many different ways." As a result of this they find it very difficult to fit in. If you are known to have been born in a particular body with a particular sex assigned to you at birth and begin to change the way you live and express yourself in a way that does not conform to those assignments, society begins to discriminate against you. She added that parents, friends, neighbors, partners, colleagues, employers and others could either accept the person or reject them. It becomes difficult to fit in with groups you were previously associated with, for example with religious and sports groups, among others. "Very often new friendships will have to be kindled and this can often be a daunting venture. The possibility of rejection is high, and so is the fear of discrimination, and even violence," Caroline said.

Even though Jennifer has still not had any surgery, she is very feminine in appearance and passes easily as a woman. Like any other young woman, she is involved in various activities in the community and also serves sport and tourism committees, among others. Many people from her past know of the changes she has made, and most of them have been very supporting and understanding.

She feels very passionate about her role as an activist and would like to see a shift in thinking around the issue of transgenderism and a change in the way in which it is viewed by society. Driven by her own experiences, Jennifer is now determined to bring transgenderism to the attention of the public, and help others like her to access information about the difficult journey ahead of them. "If I can make a difference to someone else's life and guide and advise them regarding transsexuality, then I know this journey is worth it."

*Name changed for privacy reasons