

The Oregonian

When your gender doesn't match you

A family begins to emerge from years of secrecy and embark with their 14-year-old on a journey to reveal the transgendered child's true identity

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In a quiet suburban home atop a picturesque hill in Washington County, a family is beginning to reveal its heartbreaking 14-year secret.

To the unknowing eye, they look like a prototypical suburban family: a hardworking, devout Christian couple with two clean-cut, well-mannered sons, one a college graduate, the other a high school freshman.

But behind closed doors, the younger son, Sander, is not who he seems to be on the outside.

For 14 years, this seemingly all-American family has been forced to confront the nearly unfathomable fact that the boy they nurtured through baseball and Cub Scouts is, at her core, not really a boy at all.

He is a girl in a boy's body.

During the family's long and emotional journey toward acceptance, they have lived a life of deception. They have hidden dresses and dolls, quit attending church, fled their old neighborhood and canceled birthday parties. They have battled confusion, shame and their religious beliefs.

Now, as Sander blossoms into an outwardly typical teen-age girl, her family has come a long way toward confronting the truth about its youngest member:

Sander is transgender, a nearly invisible minority among sexual minorities.

Sander herself has fought depression, anger and frustration at having to be someone she is not. As early as age 7, she contemplated suicide.

"I would say, 'Mommy, are you sure I'm not a girl?' " Sander recalls.

Some might mistake her for a gay male. But in the transgender world, she is actually a heterosexual female. Sander, like many other transgender youths, is convinced she was born into the wrong body and wants to correct the mistake with hormones and surgery. Other transgender people forgo part or all of the surgery, but dress and act like the gender they identify with. Many feel genderless -- or both male and female. The variations are legion.

Today, Sander awaits adulthood, when an operation is expected to transform her male sex organs into a female's. She takes a drug that hinders testosterone production, blocking the growth of facial hair. She dreams of one day marrying a kind husband with a good job, while she stays at home to raise three adopted children.

"It took four separate doctors to tell me, 'Look, you've got a daughter. Live with it,' " says Sander's mother, Rhonda, a 51-year-old teacher in the Beaverton School District.

Based on a Swedish study from the mid-1960s, the American Psychiatric Association's figures indicate that fewer than 3,000 U.S. men between 18 and 60 years old have undergone surgery to become women. But more recent studies from other countries point to at least 8,000 men who are post-operative women in the United States. In a widely cited analysis, Lynn Conway, a transsexual electrical-engineering professor at the University of Michigan, used studies, estimates and reported numbers of actual surgeries to conclude that at least 32,000 American men have undergone sexual-reassignment surgery. No estimate is available for the number of transsexuals who do not undergo operations.

The family agreed to tell its story to The Oregonian, hoping that their painful journey could help others understand about being transgender. The Oregonian agreed not to use the family's last name to reduce the possibility of hate crimes against Sander.

For hours, they pour out their story and their emotions in the living room of their comfortable home.

Sander curls up in an armchair, looking like any 14-year-old girl, dressed in a pink blouse, floral-print clam diggers and platform shoes. Her long, glittered hair is pulled back in a ponytail fastened with blue ribbon. A polish called Pink Alternative coats her fingernails. Her wrists and fingers are sparkly with rings and green and silver bracelets. King's Ransom eye shadow frames her eyes. Spangly earrings dangle from her pierced ears.

Her mother has no patience for those who call a transgender state a lifestyle.

"This is not a lifestyle," Rhonda says, tearing up. "Who would choose this life? I just can't imagine anyone choosing this life."

Child was always different

For as long as the family can remember, Sander was different from other boys. He liked to watch his mother cook, vacuum and put on makeup. He wanted to play with dolls. He cried when he first realized that his genitalia were male.

When Sander was a toddler, his father, Mike, says he didn't think much about his son's desire to wear Rhonda's shoes and clothes. But when Sander reached preschool and made a beeline for the dress-up box with its white wedding dress, Mike says, "I was embarrassed."

"It was a little hard for me to adapt to Sander," admits Mike, a 63-year-old utility worker who grew up in a blue-collar family led by a father in the construction business.

Rhonda blamed herself.

"I thought, 'What am I doing wrong?' " she says.

By the time Sander was 2 1/2, his parents reluctantly assumed they were raising a gay child.

"We're Christians," Rhonda says. "We were just praying that he would be straight."

But at age 9, when a psychiatrist arrived at a diagnosis of gender dysphoria, Rhonda says, half-joking, "we prayed that he would be gay."

Suicidal thought prompts action

"At 7," Rhonda recalls, "he said one day, 'Mommy, I no longer wish to live in this world.' "

They signed him up for Scouting and baseball, thinking those activities would transform him into the kind of boy they considered normal. But the attempts only made matters worse.

"He'd get all excited like a girl," Mike says. "It was embarrassing. It was sad the way they treated him."

They tried to make him act more manly, telling him to keep his pinky finger down while drinking hot chocolate and to shake hands firmly, not as though he's expecting his hand to be kissed.

"It really worked wonders," Sander says now, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

As Sander grew up, the family retreated into a secret life. At home, in private, Sander played with his mother's makeup, shoes and jewelry and his growing collection of Barbie dolls. He began to accumulate a closet full of girls' clothes, which he wore around the house.

Whenever visitors arrived, they hid everything.

"I felt like Anne Frank hiding from the Nazis," Sander says.

Sander fell into continual brooding about his life.

"It was like having a board placed on top of you and having rocks placed on top of it," Sander says. "There was no benefit for life."

Family makes changes

Sander gave up boys' clothes for gender-neutral clothing during school and visits from friends. The family stayed tight-lipped around relatives. They stopped going to St. Andrew Lutheran Church in Beaverton. They moved to a new neighborhood partly to preserve their privacy and to spare neighbors the discomfort of watching Sander undergo the inexorable transition from boy to girl. To forestall any questions from the real estate agent during the move, Rhonda covered up Sander's girls' clothes and labeled them "Drama Department."

"We went through a period of years where we didn't even have birthday parties for Sander, because we didn't have anyone to invite," Rhonda says.

Randell, Sander's now-24-year-old brother, would ask, "Why's he always wearing girls' clothes?" Rhonda says.

"It was something I didn't really want to accept," says Randell, who felt frustrated at his brother's propensity for dressing up like a girl, cleaning house and playing with Barbies.

But Randell, a fraternity man during his years at Oregon State University, happened to take a human sexuality course, in which he learned about the whole spectrum of sexuality, including transgender people. He brought the book home with him one weekend and showed it to his parents.

"He said, 'There's nothing wrong with him,' " Rhonda recalls.

Parade marks transition

The real turning point for the family came on a June afternoon in 2000. Rhonda and Mike were in downtown Portland when they happened upon the annual Gay Pride Parade. Rhonda recalls watching a group of "lovely ladies" marching by. They were representatives of the Northwest Gender Alliance, a support organization for cross-dressers and transsexuals. She was astonished.

"That's like what I live with," Rhonda recalls thinking. "I said, 'We're bringing Sander to this next year.' "

And they did.

"That was the first time we ever took Sander out dressed as a girl," Rhonda says.

They were nervous boarding the MAX train for downtown. Sander, then a sixth-grader, wore a wig and animal-print pants. They fretted about running into people they knew.

"I was nervous," Sander says. "I knew I wasn't going to be beat up. It was just scary in general. It was kind of like the opening up of my true self."

But meeting only with kindness, they felt empowered by the experience.

"All these little things gave us confidence to venture out more and more," Rhonda says.

Little by little, the family began to face reality. On their shopping trips, Rhonda and Sander shopped only for girls' clothes. By seventh grade, Sander began growing her hair out, after years of despondency over having to get boys' haircuts. At age 12, her father took her to Washington Square to get her ears pierced, a long-awaited event that left her too excited to eat that day.

The last time Rhonda saw Sander dressed unmistakably as a boy was for her mother's funeral.

"I just knew I couldn't bring Sander in a dress," Rhonda says. "I knew it was the last time I'd see Sander in a starched white shirt."

Finding acceptance

They began to tell a few people that Sander was a transgender female. Rhonda told her colleagues at work. Sander told schoolteachers and administrators, who arranged for her to use the private faculty restroom.

"I was amazed," Rhonda says, "one, how little anyone knew about it, and two, how well they accepted it once it was explained to them."

Though the subject has not come up directly with some relatives, Sander says they've told her, "We'll always accept you, no matter what."

About six months ago, Sander began to tell her friends. They weren't fazed.

"I told Rachel recently," Sander says. "She's a really, really good friend of mine. I told her, 'Can I tell you something?' She said, 'Yeah.' I said, 'I'm transgender.' She said, 'Oh,' and went on."

Today, Sander and her girlfriends watch movies, talk, try on makeup, play board games and go to the zoo.

"I have crushes," Sander says, referring to boys, "but I don't follow through."

Dressed as a girl, Sander often goes with Randell and his high school and fraternity friends to movies and other public outings. Randell was uncomfortable at first, but soon discovered that people didn't realize Sander was transgender or didn't care.

When Sander was born, Randell says he looked forward to having a brother -- "going to baseball games, having beers, doing guy stuff."

Since Sander opened up to friends, her depression has lifted.

"Sander is really happy recently," Randell says. "I'm seeing the change. She's really happy and carefree."

Ready to move forward

Sander and her family finally are ready to take the ultimate step in shedding the secrecy that has shrouded their lives: an unencumbered life in which Sander openly dresses, acts, feels and acknowledges to everyone -- family, friends, classmates and neighbors -- that she is transgender.

"If there's one thing I would say to people," Rhonda says, "it would be that there's nothing to be afraid of."

Rhonda worries about all the transgendered children whose parents can't accept them, sometimes driving them out of homes and into the streets. She expresses relief that Sander was born into their family rather than another.

"If I had a mission, it would be to raise the status of transgender people in society," says Rhonda, who is writing an advice book for parents of transgender children.

"It doesn't matter whether you're conservative or liberal," Rhonda says. "When this baby is left on your doorstep, it's there to stay."

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