

**Journey of a transgender child**

 

 The Cunningham family from left: father Colin; Harriette, 10; Khosi, 1; Phoebe, 5, and mother Megan.

 Photograph by: LYLE STAFFORD, Times Colonist

Cathie Dickens saw a change the first time she took her granddaughter Harriette shopping for a dress. “It just broke my heart to see her put it on and look at herself in the mirror,” Dickens said. “She’s so much happier, being allowed to be who she is.” Harriette Cunningham says she always knew she was a girl, even if she was born with a boy’s body. The Comox transgender girl transitioned last September and took the name Harriette in December. Now 10, she is among a rising number of children identifying themselves as trans and living as their affirmed gender.

Today, Harriette exudes confidence, standing tall with braided hair and showing off her prize-winning rooster, Henry. She just took her first Irish dance class and finished a babysitting course. But she tenses when she hears the name Declan. It’s the name her parents gave her at birth, and it reminds her what it felt like to be treated like someone you’re not.

“I feel a lot more secure and confident now,” she said. “Back then, I was kind of … I knew who I was. But no one else really did. And I was kind of all alone.”

Harriette’s father, Colin, a teacher, and mother, Megan, a nurse, say Harriette was always unique. But they didn’t know what their options were when their child began obviously identifying as a girl. “We didn’t know there were transgender people at 10 years old until we tried to figure it all out,” Colin said.

Harriette’s self-awareness and self-expression came gradually, they said. She always had feminine qualities, played with girls and preferred wearing dresses. Then she asked her parents to stop correcting strangers who assumed she was a girl. And then, after learning about puberty at age eight, something clicked.

Harriette’s anxiety went through the roof when she learned she might not always be able to just “pass” as a girl, Megan said.“It was like a light switch, she was like, “I am NOT a boy.’ ” “Once she figured that out, her conviction was absolute,” Colin said. “She knows who she is better than anybody I know.”

The transition was not seamless. Colin and Megan consulted a counsellor, who encouraged them to set boundaries, making Harriette wear masculine clothing and cut her hair short. That transition period — when Harriette had reached a point of absolute certainty while her parents were still testing whether it was a just a phase — was the toughest. “During that time, when we were still trying to say, ‘You’re a boy,’ that was the worst,” Megan said. “But we only did things that, if we looked back in 10 or 20 years, we thought we’d say, ‘We feel OK that we did that just to get to where we are today.’ ”

They consulted psychiatrists, psychologists and counselors. Megan’s turning point came when she took Harriette for a hair cut and stopped resisting her pleas to leave her hair long. For Colin, it was the Grade 2 Christmas concert. Harriette walked down the stairs in Megan’s bridesmaid dress. Caught up in his own anxiety about what other people would think, Colin froze. “I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t know what to say.” When he asked Harriette why she was wearing the dress, she said it was beautiful. Colin was too stunned to move, so Dickens swept in and hurried her granddaughter to the concert. But when Colin pictured Harriette standing in the middle of the line of boys — in her dress — something changed.

“My epiphany was, holy cow, if she has that kind of courage to say, ‘This is who I am,’ it’s the absolute least I can do as a parent to get behind her and support her in that. … We all say we raise our kids to a) not care what anyone thinks, and b) be true to themselves. And here’s my kid epitomizing that — and I’m the one with the issue.”

Colin said he admires his daughter. “She’s got a lot of courage, she’s a wonderful, sensitive person. She loves to bake — she’s 10 years old and she cooks four-course meals all by herself. She’s a really exceptional person and we think it’s wonderful and I wouldn’t change a thing.”

Life as a trans kid is a lot different today than it was 50 years ago, says sociology professor Aaron Devor, who founded the world’s largest Transgender Archive at the University of Victoria. While there is still some resistance, trans children are increasingly affirmed by their parents and allowed to live as themselves.

“There have always been trans children,” Devor said. “But in the past, parents lacking that knowledge would say, ‘No, no, no. You don’t know what you’re talking about,’ or ‘You’re crazy,’ or ‘You’re bad,’ ” he said.

The result has been historically higher at-risk behavior by trans people, including drug and alcohol abuse, as well as elevated rates of depression and suicide.

About 41 per cent of trans people have attempted suicide, according to a large 2010 U.S. survey by the National Center for Transgender Equality and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. The rates are higher for youth, according to Ontario’s Trans PULSE, which found 47 per cent of trans people 16 to 24 had seriously considered suicide in the past year, compared with 27 per cent for people 25 and older.

Thanks to online resources and more representation of trans people in the media, parents are now looking for ways to support their children.

Devor said the civil rights movement for trans people parallels a similar one in the gay and lesbian community that began several decades ago. As more people come out, he said, “more people come to understand that trans people come in every variety, just like everyone else, and deserve the same rights and respect as everyone else.”

Child psychologist Dr. Wallace Wong, who specializes in transgender issues, said more children, as well as younger children, are seeking support through his Surrey practice. They usually arrive after their parents have tried, to no avail, to repress their gender expression. By the time they seek help, nearly every trans child or teen has suffered depression and about half have attempted suicide, he said. “There’s a lot of emotional pain they feel when they feel their body does not belong to them.” But it’s difficult to know with certainty if a child is transgender, Wong said, so he works with parents and schools to create a safe environment in addition to doing detailed assessments and monitoring.

“Because there are a lot of variables in the process of growing up, [we look at] how we can give them room to grow and explore their gender without shame or boxing in,” Wong said. While young trans children typically explore their gender with the support of counsellors and psychologists like Wong, older individuals have more options. Teens who pass mental-health screening can take hormones to help them grow facial hair or breasts, while those 18 and older can have sex reassignment surgery, though Wong notes that the gender identity scale is fluid and many trans people opt against surgery.

The earliest that endocrinologist Daniel Metzger would see a child is just before puberty and not until the child has undergone mental-health screening. Those who do not present red flags such as suicidal thoughts or anorexia may be prescribed hormone blockers. The most common concern Metzger hears is that children’s hormones shouldn’t be altered when they are still becoming aware of their identity. But he said the process, which delays puberty, is reversible and the idea is to give them more time to think about it before doing something more drastic. “You take that puberty pressure off and they have more time for counselling without that ticking time bomb,” he said.

While cities tend to have support centers for families to learn what it means to be transgender, the Cunningham family has made its own headway in Comox.

It’s a small community and they’ve taken a proactive approach to provide education. Last year, they invited an expert from the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority well outside his normal travel radius to give a workshop in Comox called Creating Safe Spaces for LGBTQ Youth. He told Colin it was the biggest turnout he had ever seen.

But while many other parents have expressed support, the Cunninghams said there’s a gap between understanding and embracing Harriette. As Declan in Grade 3, her dad said, she received 10 invitations to birthday parties. As Harriette in Grade 4, she received one. “People say, ‘Oh yeah, I understand the trans issue,’ ” Colin said. “Well, there’s a big difference between understanding or embracing and supporting it.”

While the public school district where Colin works has a built-in anti-discrimination policy protecting trans youth, the francophone school that Harriette attends does not. So Harriette’s parents organized meetings with staff and faculty. This year, they started a “school-based team approach,” inviting Harriette’s teachers and principal to work together against discrimination. “Even though there is not a policy, they are allowing her to be who she is,” Colin said.

Harriette sorts some issues out through her own strong will. While the school offered the staff bathroom to her, she took the initiative to start using the girls’ washroom. “The first time I went in the washroom, I actually felt comfortable. It was weird, because everyone was glaring at me and giving me the evil eye,” she said. “But I kind of realized that it’s not really up to them, it’s not their choice.”

Bullying, unfortunately, is still a reality. A 2011 study funded by human rights organization Egale Canada found that 78 per cent of trans students feel unsafe at school, 74 per cent have been verbally harassed because of their gender expression, 49 per cent have been sexually harassed within the past year and 37 per cent have been physically harassed or assaulted because of their gender expression.

The Cunninghams are focusing on creating a safe environment. “We’re really trying to separate everyday drama from discrimination,” he said.

They made a breakthrough recently, when a student called Harriette a “he-she.” If it were a racial slur, it would be dealt with immediately, but as people still come to understand trans identities, the response is commonly slower. However, one of the teachers told the offender that she was in big trouble. “Harriette came home that day not so upset that she had been called that name, but super ecstatic that someone took it seriously and had dealt with it,” Colin said. And now that Harriette feels secure and supported, she says the bullies don’t even get to her. “You know what the funny thing is? It doesn’t hurt anymore.”

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