

Becoming

Unassuming.

This old, grimy, stacked stone Methodist church with dirty, cracked basement windows on the south side of Atlanta is not where I would expect to find this. Tonight, I am meeting a group of women who were born as genetic males. They meet once a month here to support each other as they try to straddle two worlds and find a place to belong.

“Atlanta Gender Explorations” is the name of the support group and the president, a petite little redhead named Ashley, meets me on the side of the building by the double red doors.

She identifies as a *transsexual*; a person who has had surgery to correct what they feel was a birth defect.

I was asked not to record or photograph anyone. Privacy is zealously guarded here.



Ashley strikes me as shy and reserved. She is dressed with meticulous care. She has a navy top with a pleated red skirt. Her nails are well-manicured and she looks every bit the lady. There is no question that if I met her on the street that I wouldn't think that she was born as a biological woman.

I am ushered upstairs to a shabby room filled with chairs that look like they were donated from a variety of living rooms instead of going to Goodwill. Another woman sits with a book. I introduce myself and find out her name is Michelle. Others may also know her as Bob but here, she is Michelle.

Ashley disappears, giving me a chance to speak with Michelle alone. She is an attractive woman in her mid-sixties and identifies as a cross-dresser; someone who has not taken the steps to have any body modifications but who wears clothes of the opposite gender and presents themselves as someone of the opposite gender.

Ashley reappears and she seems almost embarrassed that nobody else has shown up. “Maybe they are having a party without me” she nervously offers.

We agree to get started and the ladies are gracious enough to allow me to sit in on their support group and ask questions.

What I really want to know is how did it all begin?

“I enjoyed being a boy until I was about eleven and puberty started to hit” says Ashley. “After that, it was really confusing and I hated what was happening to my body.”

Michelle remembers that it began when she was two years old.

“I found a baby doll in my mom’s closet. I held it and was playing with it. My mom came in and asked what I was doing. I told her, ‘I’m a mama and this is my baby.’

I remember her telling me, ‘Bobby, you are a boy and boys can’t be moms.’

I told her again around the time that I was six that I wanted to be a mom and she told me again that it wasn’t possible. It alarmed my parents and they put me in Boy Scouts thinking that it would help. It didn’t.”

Childhood was also difficult for Michelle.

“I was the neighborhood sissy. I got beaten into a pile a number of times. The kids called me ‘Roberta’. I remember going to bed each night and just hoping that I would wake up as ‘Michelle’. I decided in my heart that I would become ‘Michelle’ when I was ten.”

When Michelle was sixteen, the local Boy and Girl Scout troops got together for a banquet and fashion show. The girls needed a boy volunteer to be in their show.

Michelle explains, “I jumped at the chance to wear a dress and have make-up on. When I told my mom, she asked, ‘Are you ready for the whole town to see just how much of a girl you are?’ and I asked her, ‘Are *you* ready to see just how much of a girl I am?’ She said, ‘I don’t know but I guess we’ll find out.’

“The girls got me all dolled up and I wore a beautiful pink dress. I felt like a queen. When dinner was over and people were dancing, (I’ll never forget this), my dad came walking over to me. He asked me if I would do him the honor of dancing with him. He told me that I looked beautiful. I cried and I cried.”

Touched by this beautiful story, I cried, too.

Michelle is clearly emotional when she recalls the love of her parents back in the early 1960’s. It was a rare thing to find acceptance like that and the memories of her parents, both deceased, are still very loving and warm.

Ashley had a different experience with her parents.

“My mom caught me wearing women’s clothes when I was thirteen. I was eighteen when I told her that I was a woman and I was in my thirties before we could have a discussion about it comfortably.”

Michelle reflects a lot on her past and Ashley seems to be living in the present. One curious thing that I noted about them both was that they consider themselves lesbians. They are women but they don’t want a man. They are attracted to women.



“I’m a lesbian” says Michelle. “But my wife does not consider herself as a lesbian, although she loves me more as ‘Michelle’ than she does me as ‘Bob’. When she needs ‘Bob’”, I am ‘Bob’ but otherwise, I am ‘Michelle’ and she sort of acts like the husband.”

“When you got married, were you ‘Bob’ or ‘Michelle’?” I ask.

“I was ‘Bob’ for legal purposes but I was wearing a white wedding dress. It was something that I have dreamed about since I was a child. It was the most memorable day of my life” Michelle explains. “I’ve attempted to live with one foot in one world and one foot in the other. It’s so hard. At one point, I thought I would have the surgery but a condition of my wife marrying me was that I not have the surgery so I didn’t. But if anything happens to her, I would do it and never look back.”

These ladies both knew they were women although they were born as males. They each took a different path that worked for them and they seem to be able to offer support to others who are taking this journey.

Meeting with them has deepened my sense of compassion. Being a part of their support group showed me that when people go through difficult situations, they value their experience enough to want to offer themselves up to others to share and help however it may help another.

As I drive away from that dingy church, I wondered about the other side of the coin? What is it like for individuals who were born as genetic females but who identify as males? I wanted to know and decided that my best chance of speaking to some female-to-male people would be at the Southern Comfort Conference (SCC) in Atlanta.

Southern Comfort

The SCC is the largest annual transgendered conference in the country. It brings the transgendered community from all over the country together for a week of support, workshops, products, services and camaraderie.

As I drove up to the Crown Ravinia Hotel near Perimeter Mall, it struck me what a different venue this was from the United Methodist Church on the south side of Atlanta. When I entered the lobby, I was greeted by lush plants, an enormous atrium and flowing waterfalls throughout. It was like an indoor tropical paradise, not an old, neglected building with weeds jutting through the sidewalk cracks.

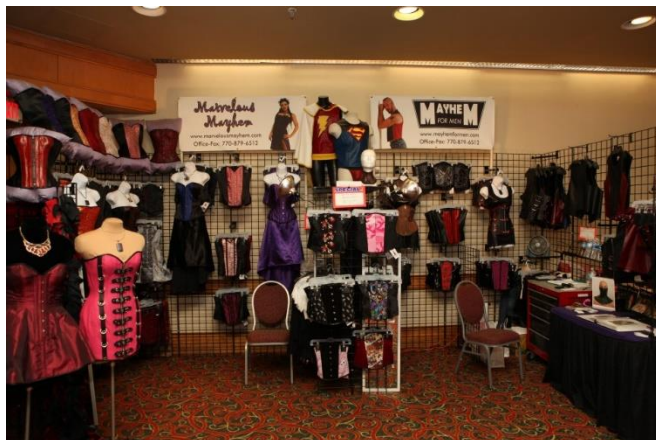


Milling about the lobby were guests of the conference sitting in overstuffed chairs and sipping on Starbucks while they talked with old friends they haven't seen since last year's conference.

The reflection of cascading water dances overhead and the echoes of high heels can be heard from any place in the atrium. Here, the women are hyper-feminine and the men are hyper-masculine.

Some of them pass as the gender they feel that they are. Others could not pass in a million years. There are male-to-females here that still have the walk of a linebacker. Nobody seems to care at all. They all exude confidence and seem to know and love one another.

I start to mill about the conference hall to see the offerings. There is an entire room of wares for sale. As I move up and down the rows, I see things crafted especially for this crowd: make-up, jewelry, wigs, women's clothes and shoes in men's sizes, photographers offering a sort of "Glamour Shots" shoot, fake boobs and special bras to put them in, corsets, and even a table called "Boi Swag" that sells prosthetic penis products that female-to-male people can wear under their clothes or for sex with their female partners.



In addition to the products for sale here, there is another room of vendors. There are doctors that specialize in surgeries, skin care places that offer laser hair removal, medical practices that specialize in transgender care, lawyers who can help navigate changing a name, birth certificate or other necessary legal procedures to secure rights and benefits.

Particularly fascinating to me was a “voice feminization” product that teaches biological males how to retrain their voices to sound more like women.

I am impressed that there are so many organizations that see this market and want to cater to it.

I meander back into the main atrium and take a seat in an overstuffed chair. One couple comes off the elevator and I ask them if they are here for the conference. They are and agree to sit down to speak with me.

The man, Trey, is wearing a camouflage baseball cap with a large fishing hook through it. He has a full beard and short, cropped hair. He has a red t-shirt, jeans and sneakers. He’s wearing a manly sports watch. His wife, Sarah, has a Kentucky shirt with jeans, heels and a purse.

They hold hands and sit down in a faux living room area. I want to know how Trey’s journey began.

“I started out as what I thought as a normal lesbian. A big dyke. I used to pretend I was a guy from about the time I was seven years old. Where I’m from in Mississippi, you don’t have that option (option to change genders). Once I learned about it, I got excited about it but also worried about the threat of losing family and friends. I wanted to hold that part of me back and be kind of accepted rather than not accepted at all. But one day, I just had enough and had to be who I am.”

“It’s crazy because people who love you can support you in every other area but when you make the decision to have your body match your brain, they push you out of their lives and shun you. You can’t mix with the straight crowd. You can’t mix with the gay crowd. You’re not the same as any of them so you’re pushed to the side.”

I ask, “How did you two meet?”

Sarah looks on lovingly at him and replies, “Through mutual friends. He was already a man and I didn’t know him any other way. Everyone has been cool with it but not everyone knows. My dad and brother are against everything so they don’t know. I was a ‘lesbian’ in my past life and they had no contact with me at that time. Now, they think I’m straight and they are happy about that so why rock that boat?”

I know that unaccepting family hasn’t been his only challenge. I recently interviewed the director of the Atlanta Health Initiative. She said that one big problem that they see in with the female-to-male transgendered people is a total lack of healthcare in the biologically female areas. These men do not like to acknowledge that they have vaginas, ovaries, a uterus and a cervix. I ask Trey about it.

“As part of the conference, they provide some of us with free lowers. I had one this morning and it was the most awkward experience of my life. It’s part of you that’s not supposed to be there.”

A “lower” is the term that trans individuals use to refer to a gynelological exam/pap smear.

“You want that area to be private even to you. It’s a reminder of what you’re not. A part of you that’s never going to be what it should be.”

“How was the doctor who gave you the exam?” I ask.

“The doctor was okay this time. But some won’t even treat me. They don’t know what to do with me. The doctor I saw today was set up for me through the conference and he was great but there’s still that initial moment where he says, ‘I’m sorry but I’ve got to put my hand inside you...’ – it’s not something that is at all comfortable.”

In addition to the actual exam, Sarah and Trey mention other medical problems that arise.

“The forms that you fill out,” says Sarah, “are always asking questions that you either have to ignore or qualify. They wanted to know when the last time he had a menstrual cycle.”

Now, *I want to know* when the last time he had a menstrual cycle but am a little scared to ask such a personal question of this strapping country boy.

Thankfully, Trey chimes in: “When was the last time I had a menstrual cycle? I don’t know. It was before I started taking ‘T’ (Testosterone, a male hormone). Two, three years ago? I don’t know.”

Sarah chimes in, “There are doctors that he regularly sees but there are no forms that are for him. All of his forms want to know what birth control he’s using. It’s degrading.”

“I have had two check-ups in the last three years and before that, I was fourteen.” Trey adds.

“Wait. Wait. So specifically, you don’t pursue medical care for yourself because it is just an overall very uncomfortable experience for you?” I ask.

“Exactly” he replied. “The one I had (PAP Smear) a couple of years ago came back abnormal. They said you can come back for a re-test but I just couldn’t do it. It’s too much. I gotta call and make an appointment. ‘Hey, my name’s Trey Davis. I need another PAP smear.’”

Click.

“Hello? Shit...”

“Every person that we came in contact with, we had to re-explain it. Every nurse, every receptionist, every person taking blood. We’ll say that we are here for a ‘Lower exam’ and nobody knows what we are talking about except the doctor who doesn’t alert his staff” says Sarah. “You go through it again and again and hope that each person will be professional about it.”

It makes me wonder, “Can’t you find a doctor in Kentucky to do this? Why wait until you come to Atlanta for the conference?”

“We looked but I had to call around to a lot of doctors and would ask, ‘Do you do lower exams for trans-men?’ and most of them had no idea what I was talking about or didn’t want to mess with him. It is just impossible to find someone with any experience in this area where we live. It’s easier to just take care of it when we come in for the conference” replied Sarah.

My mind is reeling. Healthcare shouldn’t be this complicated. What else do these people have to go through? What is the biggest challenge that they face as a couple?

Sarah answers without skipping a beat. “Legal. I just started working as a teacher and I am getting insurance for him but we have had to go through a lot of things with the insurance company about whose legal definition of a gender is the correct one? If he’s a man but the insurance only covers PAP smears and things like that for women, can he get treatment? Will they drop him if they find out he has a vagina? Our marriage is legal so they should cover it?”

As she speaks, she wrings her hands and peers into the future with apprehension. “If they dropped him or refused to cover him, I think that I would have to pursue legal action. It scares me because it’s a new job and I work for the government.”

Frustrated, Trey makes it clear: “I’m a man. Why does everything need a special label? Trans-sexual this, trans-gendered that. I’m a guy. It’s that simple.”

It should be that simple, I think. After all, nobody at this conference has made it complicated for each other. They see people, introduce themselves, and are fast friends.

While I ponder this, I notice a very handsome man coming off the elevator. I am surprised that he stops to look at the posted event schedule. Inquiring minds want to know so I ask, “Are you here for the conference?”

He smiles and comes over to me. Wow – if I weren’t a lesbian, I’d be all over this guy!

Rugged, athletic, clean-shaven and with a drop-dead smile, I am happy to have a chance to talk to him. His name is Victor.

“What are you doing here at Southern Comfort?” I ask.

“This is my first time here. I moved here about a year ago to go to Georgia Tech. I’ve heard such good things about this conference that I thought that I should check it out.”

“What are you hoping to get out of it?”

“Information. I’m still just learning about the community in Atlanta. I know people here are from all over but there are a lot of people from Atlanta here as well. I want their perspectives... I want to know what Trans people think of themselves and also what they’re interested in sharing with other people about themselves and their experiences” he says.

Ah. Makes total sense. A guy from Georgia Tech coming over to do his own ethnographic research on Atlanta’s transgendered community. To confirm, I ask, “So you are here in a research capacity because you have an interest in the transgendered community?”

“Oh, I’m part of the transgendered community. I’m trans myself.”

Shut the front door! This sexy man was born a biological woman and he is passing as a man with flying colors. I try to pay attention as he continues.

“I come here even though I no longer need support. It’s important for people like me, who are post-transition, to remain and show support for people who are just starting out to look to for advice.”

Victor, ever the gentleman, was happy to share his experience of transitioning from female to male with me.

“I always knew that I wanted to be a boy – that I was a boy. There was never a realization – it was always my reality. I started actively talking about it in my last semester of undergrad. I knew that it was my reality but what do I do about it?”

“Ultimately, I decided to transition. I was working so I transitioned on the job. My co-workers were supportive. There were a few people in the church that I was going to who weren’t cool with it but everyone else was. That was two years ago and I’ve completely transitioned. I came in as Victor but that’s how everyone here knows me.”

Hmmm. I pose a burning question to him: “So when do you tell a potential love interest, if anything, that you used to be a girl?”

“I actually am not interested in dating, to be honest. Dating and having an intimate physical relationship is never something that I’ve ever been interested in. I don’t think it’s a trans thing. It’s just like those wires in my brain never crossed. I don’t think about it. In a way, I’m fortunate that relationships haven’t been a complication for me.”

“Telling someone that you plan to transition is different than telling someone that you did transition. It’s two different types of coming out.”

“When you did transition,” I ask, “did you have the full surgery?”

“I had the top surgery (breast removal). I’m not really interested in having bottom surgery. It’s just not a big deal to me.”

We chat for a while and then I ask Victor the same question about medical care. He shakes his head in shame like a guilty dog that just got caught chewing on a slipper.

“I have not ever had a lower.”

Never?

“No.”

The mother in me comes out. This beautiful, young man needs this care. I ask, “Did you know that The Atlanta Health Initiative will pay for you to get one? And they work with places like the Atlanta Feminist Health Center to provide lower exams to trans-men. They will even sedate you for the exam.”

“One of my fellow trans-guy friends is a nurse. We were talking about this not too long ago. When I was in my early twenties, my primary care doctor tried to do that exam. It was so excruciatingly painful that she had to stop. She told me that I wasn’t in a high enough risk category to warrant the kind of pain it is causing me.”

“My friend was telling me that I need to do this. Honestly, I think I will solve the problem by having a hysterectomy but I know I will need some kind of exam before I do that. I will have to be drugged for that to happen.”

My heart breaks.

Something as simple and routine can be so traumatic for someone else - traumatic to the point of not getting basic healthcare.

These men and women deserve better.

We owe them better parents. We owe them better doctors. We owe them better laws, protections, products and support. They have not asked for this burden to be placed on them but they bear it with dignity and grace if they can bear it at all.

They are still “becoming” ...

