

MY DAUGHTER, AN UNEXPECTED GIFT

By Caroline Watson



I remember the day as if it was yesterday. It was the 16th of March 2015, my husband was at snooker when my lovely 22-year-old son came into the room and said he had something to tell me. Wringing his hands, turmoil on his face, talking under his breath and clearly upset, he told me 'I want to be a woman, I'm a woman inside and I have to do something to change the rest of my life'.

I was shocked, I didn't know what to say and my stomach felt like I'd swallowed a bowling ball. He carried on but kept retching and could hardly get the words out and my heart went out to him. He continued, 'I've been to specialists and psychiatrists and I have gender dysphoria. I've been like this since I started school'.

Finally, what I'd known in my heart for years my head now knew. As a little boy he was kind and thoughtful and loved having girls as friends but there was often crying at night and sheer terror every time school holidays ended. I tried to understand what was going on but couldn't get through. I was always asking how he was or if he was happy, but my little boy was always 'fine'. Now it all clicked, and I felt unbelievably sad and guilty that I had not recognised what my son was going through. I realised my wonderful son was going to be taking hormones and changing gender and I managed to ask if he was going to be dressing up as a girl, a stupid question but I was at a loss to understand everything. He said yes and I panicked inside, picturing him in a skirt and being laughed at and even beaten up. He said he wanted to be 'elegant' and I cried knowing this was to begin a journey that would change all our lives.

Over the coming days I cried a lot when no-one was looking, finding quiet places at work to bawl my eyes out; after all, there was nobody who would understand this and I wasn't stable enough to even broach it with my closest friends. This was an incredibly lonely time and I didn't have anyone close to me that had gone through this and I didn't even understand what gender dysphoria was. I got some words I could look up like 'transgender'

and 'male to female transition' and I explored the internet. Big, big mistake... The internet was full of hateful stories about transgender people, suicides, murders in the US, graphic images of surgery and the hell a transgender person had to face. This was not what I wanted, and I needed to believe that there was something positive out there so I did what I'm good at - I researched: properly.

I started with the NHS Website and found Ruth, a young pretty woman who revealed her own story of transition from male to female, and I knew my future daughter could do this and I had to be there for her. I found more common sense, honest websites with contacts that could help me and my path was set.

I contacted GIRES (Gender Identity Research and Education Society) and talked to a wonderful man called Bernard Reed whose own daughter had suffered horrendously during her own transition. He and his wife Terry have crusaded tirelessly ever since to get fairness, support and understanding for the transgender community and he became my mentor and my hero. He talked to me about being strong and reading all the information and research GIRES had to offer and most importantly he taught me to see a future, a bright future, for my daughter in which we would share coffees and talk about hair and make-up. Although my mind was finding it difficult to see ahead, I started to see a goal we could aim towards and I told myself 'I can do this' and my child could become the woman she always should have been.

On my journey I decided I needed help from a counsellor who, amazingly, lived around the corner from me and was specifically trained in transgender counselling. She lent me a book with a title that was a bit scary at the time called 'Queering the Tranny' by Alex Drummond. He was a courageous young man who flaunted a great beard but wanted to dress in women's clothes. Not a book I thought would help, but I read it cover to cover and discovered a man braving exactly the same things I feared my daughter would face and coming out the other side without trauma and a beaten

face but rather a willingness to engage people and educate them. An inspiring and humorous young man who continues to do talks about his experiences.

Remarkably, at the same time, a unique individual called Conchita Wurst won the Eurovision Song Contest. Here was a person with a beard and the most amazing female wardrobe I had ever seen – she was iconic and I began to think the world was changing for the better!

My counsellor also told me about the Beaumont Society who do great work with trans people and their partners. I talked to the President and she told me about the website and the events they ran and even though their age group was somewhat older than my daughter's they welcomed our membership with open arms, something I will always be grateful for and I'll come to that later.

A lovely lady at the Gender Trust told me about FFLAG and Sparkle, Grimsby Pride was also coming up in September. This was one hell of a learning curve but I was getting there. I also joined a Facebook page but felt vulnerable with my details out there, preferring to meet two parents with children my daughter's age, as many parents already had Mermaids as their support and our over 20s age group was sadly lacking.

So my daughter continued her journey, wanting to be called Hannah, being feminine at home and androgynous when out and about. It was a strain keeping up the pretence and we could see it was very difficult for Hannah to be seen as someone she didn't want to be.

She so wanted to be female and we had many tears worrying about what to do next. We suffered the trauma of job hunting – do I interview male or female? Do I transition before or after? Will there be prejudice against a transgender person? She eventually decided

to take time out and volunteered at a local Nature Reserve to build her confidence and although she was dressing masculine, she enjoyed the work and was making friends.

We started to go out more as Hannah grew more confident, taking a trip to York McArthur Glen with me at Christmas. Hannah in her new skinny jeans and boots was easily 6ft tall and with me being 5ft 2in tall we must have made quite the couple. Scared as I was for Hannah we coped pretty well and experienced no pointing fingers or being 'called out' that I thought, in my worried mind, we would encounter. We felt triumphant driving home that day and ready for the next phase in Hannah's remarkable journey

Hannah had sent all her forms off to be considered by a Gender Identity Clinic and nine months after that conversation in March she was told there was at least a 3 year waiting list to even see a consultant. This was extremely distressing for Hannah, seeing her features change and living with a reflection she detested and those quiet times she sat in her bedroom were constantly worrying and too much for us to bear. If we were to go private it was not going to be cheap and if the GP would not do shared care we would have to pay for the hormones and the blood tests too – it was a big decision and one I realised many parents in this position couldn't do, living with the prospect of their young ones considering suicide to take them out of this agony. I was lucky enough to have a good job and the means to do it and we decided for Hannah's sanity and ours to go down the private route.

The visit to the private Gender Clinic in London followed soon after and, as the appointments were set up to get her towards prescribing hormones, we knew we had to allow Hannah to emerge properly and we had to be prepared. I purchased a great book called 'Trading Places, When Our Son became A Daughter' by an American mum called Jane Baker. This book was so inspiring, not only covering the process she and her daughter went through but providing common sense facts too.

I used the author's inspiration to broach the communications that would be needed, choosing to write letters to our friends and family that were overseas or distant from us. I was mindful that some people would not accept the change and that we would understand if they didn't want to keep in touch. I also had a lovely article that Hannah had written for the Beaumont Magazine that I included in every letter, this was a real story from the heart for Hannah. Every one of them wrote or called and congratulated Hannah and wished us all the best of luck for the future. I couldn't believe the support and

understanding that we received.

My close friends and work colleagues I chose to tell directly and share Hannah's article, as did my husband (but he took a little longer, not easy for a man to broach the subject in general conversation but he got there). They were all fantastic and my friends asked me why I hadn't told them sooner. I can truly say I hadn't been in the right place, but now I was and I would fight for my daughter tooth and claw.

Finally, and only because I was worried about them accepting that their grandson of 23 years was to be their grand-daughter, we told my husband's mum and dad (my dad had dementia and really didn't recognise many people so it was just someone new who came each week).

They were shocked and asked lots of questions but said they loved their grandchild and would work really hard to say 'she' instead of 'he' and call her Hannah. I cried with relief on the way home, promising to get them a new photograph to replace their male photo.

A couple of weeks later, after my new photograph of Hannah was hung on the wall, Grandma and Grand-dad invited their friends in to wait for them as they put their coats on for the Sunday trip to the pub – something they had never done before. They asked who the girl was in the photograph and Grandma replied, 'That's my grand-daughter'. 'But you haven't got a grand-daughter,' they replied and Grandma said, 'I have now.' How amazing is that, I could have cheered! I couldn't have got a better response to Hannah's evolution, even in their 80s they were showing people how it should be done.

Hannah had her own Red-Letter Day when she needed to tell the Nature Reserve where she volunteered that she was Hannah, and the day she left for work I was terrified. This could be the worst or best day of her life...

Her employees were amazing, were supportive of her transition and would accommodate anything she needed. She was elated when she came home, like a new person, which she was in a way, finally being able to tell someone who she really was. The next day Hannah, dressed to kill, well maybe to pond-dip, went to work as her true self and this encounter was to mould Hannah's future steps in her journey.

In March 2016 we attended our first Beaumont Event, based around the 1920s, an event that revealed Hannah to me in a way I never expected. Hannah was a revelation, being one of the three youngest girls there didn't make any difference. Modelling!! Never in a million years would my young lad have held his head high like that and smile like she smiled. On the dance floor doing the Charleston in her

cute lace dress – I was blown away and she looked so flipping gorgeous! Disco dancing!! This was the real Hannah emerging and I was so proud, the transformation from the pre-Hannah days of head down, never engaging with anyone, struggling to fit in were gone, she was who she was born to be.

Now Hannah was on hormones and beginning her new life, she changed all her documents and we finally did some clothes shopping that wasn't in Charity Shops or online. Shop assistants were really friendly and wanted to share Hannah's story. We also had that coffee and talked about hair and make-up exactly as Bernard from GIREs said we would. We had come a long way and although we still had more hurdles to jump, we were in a good place.

Now her journey changed direction. Hannah had arrived and she decided she would be an advocate for transgender people. She wrote and got replies from charities who wanted to know more about transgender issues and how they could be better at understanding their needs. With Lincolnshire NHS Social Care students, she has made a difference to their curriculum in how to deal with transgender people in care and spoken at their conference. With charities like Homestart, Barnardo's, MIND and Yorkshire MESMAC, she influenced their policies and training. She still works with Stonewall in schools to make sure policies are not just pieces of paper and she now works for a wonderful organisation in Yorkshire that supports vulnerable people and regularly talks on local radio in support of transgender people.

As parents we are so proud of our daughter and I have the opportunity to help parents of young people as individual as ours to get them through what can be a very difficult and lonely time and to work with Hannah to provide helpful and useful contacts for their child to make through their own media platforms.

The first parents I was able to support were put in touch with me via the Beaumont Society and I want to team up with them to offer support and understanding to other parents of transgender young people via their magazine and helpline.

As a final note, I have been enlightened and enriched by the stories of many wonderful transgender people as we trod this path and, as a parent walking with Hannah through our own individual pathways, I have come to believe that her generation are far more accepting of gender differences than older generations. They don't just accept gender diversity, they are gender diversity. That gives me huge optimism for the future of our young transgender people. We just need the support services, like clinics and GPs, to catch up. But that's another story ■