

His name Is Aurora

by John Cloud

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When a boy is raised as a girl, an Ohio suburb is suddenly in the throes of transgender politics

Even before her son turned two, Sherry Lipscomb noticed that he wasn't like other boys. When she took him shopping, he would go gaga at sparkly dresses. He would toss his baby blanket around his head like a wig and prance on the balls of his feet. Around age 3, he announced one day that when he married his friend Emily, they would both wear red wedding gowns at the ceremony. Yet, says Mom, her child "was still a little boy to me at the time."

Not so anymore. After struggling with their six-year-old's nonconforming gender behavior for years, Sherry and Paul Lipscomb decided a few months ago to treat their little one like a girl, at least at home. In kindergarten last year, he was Zachary, but after school, she was Aurora--Rori for short--a name the Lipscombs say their child chose in honor of the princess in *Sleeping Beauty*. Over the summer, when the child asked to have pierced ears and announced to neighbors, "I'm a girl," the Lipscombs came to believe that it was wrong not to "let Aurora express her gender in public," as Paul says. So with the help of a Cleveland, Ohio, support group for transgendered people, they hired an attorney to seek a legal name change for their child. And last month they informed the school principal that it was Rori who would be enrolling, not Zach.

The Lipscombs' unusual decision has dumbfounded Westerville, Ohio, a homogeneous Columbus suburb. (And a Republican stronghold: on his way to the G.O.P. Convention last month, George W. Bush stopped to read to students at a school here.) After the Lipscombs met with the principal, an anonymous tipster contacted the Franklin County Children Services agency, which swiftly asked a court to remove the minor from the home. A magistrate granted the agency temporary custody, citing "reasonable grounds to believe that the child is suffering from illness...and is not receiving proper care."

Thus a complicated family dynamic became a legal struggle. And a public event--the Lipscombs insisted on turning their child over to social workers before cameras at a local TV-news station. (The parents say the media scrutiny will keep the children's services office in check.) Gender PAC, a Washington-based group that lobbies for equality for transgendered people, has also helped publicize the case. Transgender activists around the world have contacted the county children's agency in protest. A growing media circus greets each court development. Last week the child's case was stalled while everyone argued for days over whether cameras should be in the courtroom.

But underneath the layers of tabloid story lines and political opportunities lies a family that's struggling through a gray time. The children's services department had actually first

encountered the Lipscombs in February, when the parents voluntarily began working with the agency to get help with a host of family problems: Paul and Sherry both have bipolar disorder; they have fought in the past, sometimes violently; Paul struggles with memories of being beaten as a child; Sherry told TIME she has never allowed her husband to be home alone with her child overnight. ("They are both too hotheaded," she explained.) She said she has occasionally become overwhelmed by the many physical and psychological needs of her child, who has been found to have Asperger's syndrome (which is related to autism), bipolar illness and obsessive-compulsive disorder, in addition to gender-identity disorder. And although he hadn't come out in public until an interview with TIME, Paul now says he believes he too has gender-identity disorder and that he intends to make the transition from male to female. For now, Sherry is supporting Paul as he writes this new chapter in his life. But both say their main focus is regaining custody of their child, who is living with a foster family.

In short, you might safely say the Lipscombs aren't the Cleavers. But the county, perhaps recognizing that it's not a crime for a family to be dysfunctional, never saw reason to break up the Lipscombs--until the parents began to refer to their youngster as a girl in public. Since then, some county officials have treated the Lipscombs, including the troubled child, as pariahs. Claims and counterclaims abound. The Lipscombs say the child told them the foster parents won't use the name Aurora and hid the dresses they bought for Aurora; they've also allegedly belittled the vegetarian diet Paul and Sherry follow. County officials do call the child Zachary but say the youth has access to the dresses and doesn't want them. Both sides have alleged that the other hasn't provided proper medication for the child.

What's best for this youngster? Unfortunately, few experts study children with persistent gender variance, and the ones who do are in disagreement about what to do about it, if anything. "I think it's just the way they are born," says Catherine Tuerk, a mental-health nurse who runs a Washington support group for parents of kids who are gender-atypical. Her group has nine families at the moment, and Tuerk encourages them to support their children's unconventional gender expression "in a world where they will be stigmatized."

Some child psychologists, on the other hand, believe that children who express discomfort with their birth gender probably have larger problems. "There's a lot of pain in many of these families, and part of the way the child has dealt with the pain is to have this fantasy solution," says Ken Zucker, a psychologist who runs the Child and Adolescent Gender Identity Clinic in Toronto. Zucker also encourages children and parents to recognize that boys and girls don't have to maintain rigid gender roles to remain boys and girls. Zucker says that widening his young patients' conception of gender may save them the difficulty of pursuing sex-reassignment surgery later in life.

Other rogue therapists mistreat gender-variant children by trying to force them to conform to gender rules. They use blunt behavior-modification techniques such as rewarding tomboys for wearing frilly dresses or punishing effeminate boys for playing with a Barbie. "Many of those kids become runaways, and they are damaged for life," says Gender PAC's Riki Anne Wilchins.

Amid all the problems, the Lipscomb child apparently has loving parents. But whether Aurora remains Aurora, or returns to Zachary--or decides on another identity--the kid is destined to conduct this search with armies of lawyers battling nearby.

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