

My teenage son wants to be a woman

by Chris Morris

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Beth Thomas always knew her son Adam was different she just couldn't put her finger on it. At times she grew despondent at his mood swings. Adam was spending more and more time alone in his bedroom and when Beth asked what was wrong he wouldn't answer properly.

"I'd always wondered if Adam was gay," says Beth, 49, an office manager from Southend, Essex. "Even when he was growing up he'd always choose girls' clothes instead of boys' and play with the girls at school. I thought it was just a matter of time before he told me."

But a few years later, when Adam was 18, he dropped a bombshell. He wasn't gay but he wanted to change sex.

"I knew telling Mum would be one of the hardest things I'd ever have to do," says Adam who's now living as Zoe. "She'd always been quite open-minded but I knew telling her I wanted a sex change was going to be difficult. It would be hard for anyone to deal with."

Five years earlier, Adam had started to feel uncomfortable about his identity and sank into a deep depression.

"It didn't help that I was being bullied at school," explains Zoe, 19. "I simply didn't want to do any of the things other boys did like play football, fight and so on. I even took ballet lessons for a while. I'd get called a poof and be pushed around. I felt suicidal"

But when puberty hit, things got worse. "I started growing facial hair and it simply didn't feel right," adds Zoe. "I felt disgusted by it. I developed a sex drive too and that was very confusing. I wondered if I was gay but I fancied girls, though I felt more like them than a teenage boy."

Adam left school at 16 to take a course in computing. There he found an outlet for his frustrations and made some friends. "There were boys at college who experimented with makeup," recalls Zoe. "So I could wear lipstick and dress in sarongs without other students thinking I was strange."

It was six months later that Adam discovered why he was feeling the way he was.

Surfing the Internet one night in July 1999 he came across the word 'transsexual'.

He logged on to the website and everything began to make sense. "There were stories about women trapped in men's bodies," recalls Zoe. "I identified with them strongly and nearly shouted out that's me! Suddenly I didn't feel so alone. I was frightened about the future but the overwhelming feeling was one of relief."

Adam discovered there were operations and hormone treatments available for transsexuals to help them cope with their feelings.

"Almost immediately I knew I was really a girl," says Zoe. "I asked Mum what she would have called me if I'd been born a girl. She said Zoe and that's what I decided to call my alter ego my real self."

Adam confided in friends first of all. "My closest friend Michelle said, 'Oh, cool! If that will make you happy,'" remembers Zoe. "My other friends, Alex and Mike, didn't seem shocked at all. The only comment they made was at Christmas when Alex said he didn't know what to get me as he'd never bought anything for a girl before."

Adam, an only child who's had no contact with his father since his parents split up five years ago, was still petrified about telling his mum. It wasn't until Christmas Eve 1999 that the truth came out.

"I came home and found him wearing one of my Chinese dresses," recalls Beth. "I was stunned and asked him what he was doing. He burst into tears, sat down and hid his face. He told me he wanted a sex change. I told him he was messed up. I didn't think he could be serious. The only transsexual I knew was Hayley in Coronation Street. He was far too young to be making decisions like this. Looking back I feel awful about the way I reacted."

Over the next six months, Adam and Beth often rowed about his identity crisis.

"She kept saying it was stupid," says Zoe, who works for an Internet company. "I tried to explain that I was really Zoe but she wouldn't listen."

Beth tried desperately to come to terms with her son's feelings. She began surfing the Net for more information and also phoning helplines.

"I spoke to other transsexuals and realised they were ordinary, nice people," she says. "I discovered it was a medical condition, diagnosed from psychiatric assessment, not a lifestyle choice or perversion."

"I suddenly understood why Adam had been behaving the way he had and that having a sex change might finally make him happy."

"I spoke to my GP and he said it was a good thing that Adam had made the decision so young, as it would save him years of anguish having to live as a man."

"I've found the fact that I'll never have grandchildren very hard to deal with. But I've learnt to accept it. If things had carried on the way they were, then my son may have committed suicide and I'd have lost him altogether."

One day last summer, Beth came home with a surprise. She held out her hand and gave Adam a keyring with the name 'Zoe' on it.

"I hugged him and told him I'd support him," she says. "I knew he was determined to go through with it. I told him I wanted to meet Zoe, to see my son dressed as a girl."

A few days later Beth took Zoe on a shopping spree to buy skirts and tops. "When he put on the clothes I was a bit shocked," says Beth. "But the striking thing was how his personality changed. He was like a kid in a sweet shop. I could see he was so much happier being Zoe."

Zoe discovered help on the Internet and visited a psychologist in London. He was diagnosed as transsexual and on his very first visit in August last year he was prescribed a course of female hormones.

"It can help to have the operation earlier rather than later," says Dr Russell Reid, consultant psychiatrist specialising in gender identity, who's treating Zoe.

"One in every 10 coming to see me is now under 20. For many young people with a crisis about their gender identity it can lead to confusion and hold them back. Having the operation can help them get on with the rest of their life."

"Since I've been taking the hormones my skin is softer and people tell me my figure is much more feminine," says Zoe. "I've even started to develop breasts. I'm a lot calmer but I find myself getting much more emotional, especially at the end of soppy films!"

"When it comes to relationships I think of myself as a bisexual female and most people I mix with are transsexuals or very open-minded, so I don't think I'll have many problems."

Adam began living as Zoe 24 hours a day.

"When I told my boss, my stomach was churning," says Zoe. "But he was really understanding. I wore women's clothes to work and sent an e-mail to everyone asking if they'd call me Zoe. I'm sure there was gossip but everyone has been great."

Beth knew she'd have to tell her friends. "Not one of them batted an eyelid:" says Beth. "They were just intrigued."

Zoe is now saving for the private £9,000 operation which she plans to have next year. The surgery, which takes four hours, involves cutting the penis and inverting it to construct a vagina. Before then Zoe has to live as a woman for 12 months.

"Mum has gone from one extreme to the other," says Zoe. "She wants me to be really girly. But I just like to be natural and wear denim skirts, a blouse and not much make-up."

Beth has surprised herself at her change of attitude.

"I genuinely think it's for the best," she says. "Zoe is a much happier person than Adam ever was. Adam had difficulties growing up and was a very difficult child. Zoe is much more happy-go-lucky. There was a period when I felt like I was in mourning for the son I'd lost. A little bit of my heart still misses him. But now I think of it as losing a son but gaining a daughter. And Zoe is a lovely daughter too!"