

Interview with Jessica McKinnon for Marie Claire, SA

January 14, 2008

Marie Claire: Most of your biography is on your website; so these are just particular questions about how you felt...

What is your earliest memory of wanting to be a girl? Tell me more about it; when did you first realise that you want to be a girl?

Jessica McKinnon: I can't honestly remember the first time I felt that something was wrong with me based on my birth sex. However, I very clearly remember the first time that I realized that being a boy or a girl was not necessarily defined by what was between your legs. I was about 4 or 5 year old, at preschool. As was the norm at the time, everyone in the class went to the restroom together. I never felt comfortable in that situation, and that was one of the few activities at preschool that used to distress me. Most times, I just said I didn't need to go. Then one day, one of the girls in the class went into one of the stalls (which didn't have doors), and I couldn't help but notice that when she stood up, there it was. She had what I had between my own legs. I was a little confused, but after that, I didn't feel so bad about those communal restroom breaks, because there was another little girl with the same "defect" that I was born with. I vaguely remember asking her about it, and while she was embarrassed about it, she showed me that she had both girl and boy "thingies" between her legs. So while we weren't the same, I realized for the first time in a 5-year-old way that it was okay to be different.

MC: How did you tell your parents/how did they find out?

JM: In some ways, I wish I had talked to my parents about that early experience at preschool, but to be honest, I just wasn't ready to talk to anyone about it at the time. While I knew I was different somehow, I just didn't know how to put it into words. And so I bottled it up, and went on with living as the boy that I was expected to be, even though I wasn't completely comfortable with it. It was only about 25 years later that I had finally figured things out enough in my mind to speak to my family about my situation. If there is one thing that I regret about having waited so long, is that my dad passed away a few years before, and so he never got to experience me as his other little girl. Instead, he only ever knew me as his son, which is a memory I will treasure always, despite my personal discomfort. When I finally decided to talk to my mom about it, we were already living continents apart, so I had to settle for breaking the "news" over the phone.

MC: How did they react?

JM: In much the same way as I'd felt through my childhood, I felt very intimidated by the situation, and almost backed out of it. My wife at the time was on the phone with me, and she supported me throughout the conversation. My mom didn't really have much of a reaction that day, and she almost took it in her stride, but I knew that it would probably take some time for the reality of it to sink in before I could expect her true reaction. The last two and a half years have been a bit of a rollercoaster ride of emotion for her, but over

time, she came to accept that this was something that I really needed to do in order to be comfortable with myself. A little over a year later, I received the most wonderful birthday gift from my mother: a birthday card addressed with my new name, and a card which read "To my very special daughter..."

MC: How did this make you feel?

JM: One of the things that my mother repeated many times over the last few years is that the only thing that she wanted most for her kids is for us to be happy. I felt very privileged to have a mother who could see past the unpopular stigma attached to being transgender, and still love me as her child. I knew that I had potentially put my relationship with her on the line, so when I heard her say that after coming out to her, I was very, very relieved.

MC: How has it affected your relationship with your sister?

JM: My relationship with my sister has also been a bit of a rocky road, but I always appreciated all the feedback that she's given me along the way. She has always been very protective of me, as I was always the weaker of the two of us. As such, knowing that the call to my mom would be tough, I called my sister just before calling my mom, first coming out to her, and then asking for her advice about whether I should tell her on the phone, or if I should wait another full year before I would see her face-to-face again when they were planning to visit me in the U.S.

MC: How are your relationships now?

JM: My relationship with my mother has never been closer or stronger than it is right now. We talk every weekend for over an hour at a time, talking about how our things went that week and what we have planned for the weekend. Sometimes we even have more "girly" chats about my trips to the spa, or about a shopping trip where I found the perfect outfit.

Things aren't quite there yet with my sister, but I remain hopeful that we'll be able to be just as good friends as I am now with my mother. Of course, my sister is very different to my mother, so I always appreciate her contrasting opinion. She really does care about me, and even though she is still not quite sure that I am doing the right thing, she helps to give me the occasional reality check.

MC: How did other children treat you? How did you feel around other children?

JM: Throughout school, I was never really comfortable with myself. While I often felt more like a girl, I knew (because of what society was telling me) that I needed to at least try to toughen up and be the man that I was growing up to be. Other children at school would often tease me and bully me because I was such an easy target. As a sensitive child, I used to get upset very easily and I tended to cry a lot when the other kids picked on me and did mean things to me.

MC: Was it hard growing up? Tell me about this – being at school, varsity?

JM: When I moved up from primary school into high school, I made a conscious effort to try to fit in better, but the common theme of not only feeling like I should be one of the girls, but also being teased about some of my feminine characteristics, just didn't go away, no matter what I did. Even being in my high school's boys' first basketball team didn't change anything. Instead, that just helped to highlight the fact that I wasn't as tough as I should be for a boy. The team would even play pranks on me, like switch out the contents of my kitbag with that of a girl who had accidentally left her own bag behind at school. Of course, the incidents just helped to strengthen the idea that I should have been a girl, even if there was nothing that I could do about it (or so I thought).

At university, I went through a very rough patch, having come very close to committing suicide, and finally found myself facing all of my greatest fears when I booked myself into an outpatient mental hospital for troubled teens and young adults. It was a gruelling three months of solid therapy of every kind, but I ultimately learned a lot about being my own person, and that it was then that I discovered my responsibility to be true to myself and that I shouldn't necessarily have to be the person that other people expected me to be. While I didn't deal with any of my gender issues at the time, those three months gave me a very solid foundation for dealing with those issues many years later in a much more mature and realistic manner. One notable thing that I remember my personal therapist at the time commenting about on my last day in the group, though, was that I should spend some time thinking carefully about my reasons for tending to socialize with the younger girls in the group.

MC: Did you start hiding the fact of who you really were? Why and how did this make you feel?

JM: I went far beyond just hiding myself. I went so far as to convince myself that I really was a boy. When I was a young child, I did my best to join in the boys' games. I was never particularly good at them, and never really felt like I belonged, but I just chalked that up to me just not being the kind of person that people preferred to be around. Of course, I would often find myself playing with the boys, and longingly watching the girls playing their own games, or sitting around just talking to each other. I hated having to catch myself and prevent myself from staring longingly at the girls. I even convinced myself at one point that looking at girls was somehow immoral and that the way that I felt about myself and my longing to be with the girls was somehow evil.

MC: Have you been in contact with old school/varsity friends/acquaintances? How do they respond? And how does this make you feel?

JM: Last year was the 15th anniversary of my high school graduation, and I decided to make a concerted effort to get back in touch with my old school friends. I was most relieved when I was accepted with open arms by my old friends, but even more so by the girls that I had always wanted to be friends with. All the support was quite unexpected, and it has certainly been an exciting few months getting to know some of my old school friends better, and especially to hear how many of them had perceived me. One girl that I had a huge crush on in high school even related how confused she was because she had been convinced that I was gay, but then her theory fell apart when I had started expressing my affection for her

all those years ago. So when she finally found out about my transition, everything finally fell into place and her experience of me finally made sense to her. It has been stories such as these that I have found to be very affirming of my own very confusing experience as a teen, having finally figured it all out many years later.

MC: You were married; how did you meet your wife? What made you realise she was the one for you?

JM: I was always a bit of a geek, and so, in true geek fashion, I met my wife in an online chat room (#CapeTown on ZANet IRC for those other geeks reading this). It was the fact that just as one of us would be arriving, the other was leaving. After seeing it happen literally dozens of times, purely by chance, we both became intrigued. One day we finally just started chatting and realized that we really enjoyed chatting with one another. Spending so many hours chatting was considered highly unusual back then before online chat had become mainstream, and we decided to meet for a drink after work one day. Well, that drink turned into dinner, which turned into an attempted walk on the beach in an unrelenting Cape Town gale force wind, which turned into a romantic escape up the mountain, where we finally got to spend a short time away from the world. Just a week later, we had gotten to know each other so well, that we were practically completing each other's sentences. We simply had a connection at the deepest possible level. We just knew we were soul mates, and on the day 8, she proposed to me, and I wholeheartedly accepted her proposal.

MC: Did you ever tell your wife (before you decided to have the sex-change) about how you felt deep down inside? Or were you still in "denial" about it? why did you choose to do this?

JM: My wife had always known me for my softer side, and we always had an unusually open line of communication. We really understood each other, and over time, she got to experience more and more of the girl in me, without me even realizing that I was letting my guard down about whom I always felt I was inside. So while I had not intended to talk to her about it at the time, she still got a good taste for me as a person, and with her being the very perceptive person that she is, she started to quietly question my gender identity long before I had even started consciously exploring that myself.

MC: How were your roles defined in your marriage?

JM: Starting with the role-reversed marriage proposal, our marriage was chockfull of reversals of the traditional roles. I was always the cost-conscious one, clipping coupons to save a buck here and there, while my wife was the typical do-it-yourself person, tending to fixtures around the house, installing large household items, and embarking on amazingly complex projects that I always had my doubts about until they were finally complete. But being the more submissive one in the relationship, I just went with them, knowing that she needed someone to throw in the odd reality check when her projects were getting a bit too ambitious. Another role-reversal was very clear when we'd have guests over for dinner. I'd be the one making salads in the kitchen, talking to our guests' wives, while my wife was tending to the barbeque, having a drink with the guys out by the fire (yes, yes, I know... I said barbeque... we were living in the U.S. at that point, and people looked at us funny when

we said "braai"). Looking back, I think that one of the great attractions to my wife was the fact that with her, I got to find a reasonably good balance between my girly side, and my rather feeble attempt by that stage of keeping up my "guy" act. It was the openness in our relationship that allowed me to just be myself more and more, and to discover more about myself over time.

MC: When did you tell her? How did you tell her and how did she respond/react?

JM: It was a fairly gradual progression in that we both got to learn about transsexual transitions at the same time, watching a number of excellent documentaries on the topic presented on TV. We had recorded a few of the better ones, and one night, while we were sitting watching one of them that we had already watched many times over, she noticed that I was quietly crying to myself, watching one of the girls in the documentary that I really related to. She left me to cry for a bit, and eventually, I was simply bawling my eyes out. She stopped the video playback, and turned me to face her. She looked into my teary eyes and while trying to fight back her own tears, she told me that if this was something that I felt that I needed to do, that she would be there for me every step of the way.

MC: How did it feel to see her react in this way?

JM: Hearing her say those words lifted a huge burden from my shoulders, as it saved me from having to try to find a way to tell her. Her support meant the world to me, and combined with the months of research, I was ready to make the decision right at that moment that I was ready to take on the burden of going through with this very daunting—and often very scary—transition.

MC: What happened to your relationship? Did you divorce; are you still in contact? How did it make you feel?

JM: With me finally being true to myself, in some ways, our relationship actually improved. Of course, we both knew that the dynamic of our relationship was about to undergo a transition of its own. We became girlfriends, and I remember her taking me to get my ears pierced, and we went on a bit of a "retail therapy" spree to celebrate.

But life has its way of throwing the odd curveball. A few months later, she happened to meet another guy who became a very good friend to her, and they spent hours talking about everything. They became very close and it was just a matter of time before they fell in love. She was very honest with me about everything, and we even investigated ways in which we might be able to incorporate her newfound love into our lives. But because of some of the logistics involved, it ultimately came down to a choice, and after a great deal of agonizing over everything, she decided to go with him. I was devastated, as my only line of real support was leaving. I learned many life lessons over the months that followed, and ultimately dug myself out of the depression that I had fallen into.

We ultimately divorced, to allow her to remarry. While it was rough, we had established our new roles as friends, and we remain very good friends to this day. She seems much happier now than she ever was with me, and likewise, I am now much happier with my new life than I

ever was before. I am blessed that we have been able to maintain our friendship considering the circumstances.

MC: How did your family (extended) react when they heard that the truth? Are you still close or not in touch? How was your relationship affected?

JM: Being so far away (I am still living in the U.S. while most of my extended family are in South Africa), my coming out to my extended family has been very different to the way that I would have preferred it. As part of my mom dealing with the transition, she gradually shared more and more about my new life with them. As my mom's acceptance of my transition grew, so did that of my extended family. I finally got to speak to some of them over the phone last year, and I was touched to hear the wonderful things that my mom had been conveying about me to them. I was also rather excited to hear that a number of my relatives had followed the example of my mom accepting me as her daughter, in that they had accepted me as a niece.

More recently, after getting in touch with many of my school friends through a popular online social networking site, I've also reconnected with a number of my closest cousins, with whom I had been out of contact for many years. I have been greeted mostly with overwhelming acceptance and love, which is something that so many in my position do not ever get to experience.

MC: How did your friends react? Did you lose many or gained many? How did this make you feel?

JM: My friends who knew me prior to the transition reacted with support and acceptance when I came out to them. However, the vast majority of those friendships died off very quickly, and left me with only a few who have remained very close to me throughout my transition, and I now consider them to be part of my family here in the U.S.

Having lost so many friends, combined with the trauma of the breakup of my marriage, I went into a downward spiral of depression, one which I knew from many years before. Having learned the life lessons that I had learned along the way, I quickly pulled myself out of it, and learned to feed on my own self-confidence. I started meeting many new people as Jessica, and all of those new friends accepted me from the start for being the person that I am.

MC: How did your employers react and how did you feel about this? How did it affect what you do for a living? What do you do now? why?

JM: At the same time that I was starting to meet new friends, and my self-confidence was rapidly increasing, I came out to my employer, an economic consulting firm based in Washington, D.C. Thankfully, I work for an organization that has a strong focus on diversity and inclusion in the workplace. That is not to say that there wasn't a lot of work to be done to pave the way for my transition on the job. After months of planning, and gradual disclosure to key management individuals (starting at the top of the company and working our way down), and involving those key people in the planning stage, my plans to transition on

the job were made public through a carefully written memorandum to all staff. Because the memorandum came directly from the company's managing partner, there was an instant feeling of respect towards me and what I was doing, as well as towards the company for being supportive of such a potentially troublesome transition. As a direct result of this approach, I have experienced very few issues at work (and those were very short-lived, as I worked closely with those individuals to re-establish a good working relationship with those people).

For the most part, my transition at work has had a largely positive impact on my productivity, mainly because I don't have to expend so much effort anymore on hiding who I really am. Also, I now have a few colleagues that I consider to be some of my closest friends. Of course, it has been very interesting and somewhat humorous at times to see the classic gender roles manifest themselves. That said, it has also been interesting to have been on both sides of the fence, having first experienced so-called "male privilege" for a significant part of my career, and, more recently, having experienced what I like to refer to as "female privilege," which traverses a path ever so close to what can be described by some to constitute sexual harassment. Thankfully, I work in an environment where most employees and managers know where to draw the line at just being genuinely nice.

MC: How and when did you actually discover that you can have an operation/sex-change (even if it was when you were a little child, how did you realise you can do something about it)? And how did this make you feel (excited/nervous/anxious at the thought that something can be done)? Why?

JM: When I was a teenager, I had heard of people getting sex-change operations, but for some reason, I never made the connection between what I felt and the surgery as part of a potential solution. Rather, it was at the age of 30, in 2004, that I first saw a documentary on TV that first exposed me to some of the possibilities of a gender role transition. Suddenly there was a glimmer of hope, seeing how others before me had undergone this rather elaborate and life-saving transition. I have to admit that at first, I was very discouraged by many of the disaster-stories that I was reading. Over time, though, I began to realize that many of the pitfalls of other's transitions were avoidable, or at least could have their effects mitigated through meticulous planning.

I'd like to clarify that the transition process involves a lot more than just a simple surgical procedure. It is a slow process of unlearning and relearning behaviours, years of psychotherapy, hormone replacement therapy, and some very painful procedures to remove unwanted facial and body hair. In addition to the more obvious surgical procedure to transform one's genitalia, many transsexuals need additional surgeries and other cosmetic procedures on the face and body in order to help them to reach their own personal goals. This is a very personal transition, and each person going through the process needs to carefully evaluate their own needs in order to know which surgeries or procedures to follow. By way of example, I do not feel that facial or breast augmentation surgery is necessary as part of my own transition, as the hormonal changes have produced enough of a change that I am comfortable and happy with the way that I am right now. For many, like me, while genital reconstructive surgery (GRS) is major surgery, it is more of a minor step along the way, where the main transition really occurs when one transitions from living in one gender role,

to living full time in another. GRS will just make living in the new gender role a lot simpler—the surgery cannot remedy the situation just by itself.

MC: When did you decide that you wanted to have a sex-change? Why?

JM: For me, it is not so much about "wanting" to have a sex change, but rather that I am not happy with my body the way that it is, and undergoing major surgery is currently the only way to make my body as close as possible to what my brain perceives differently to what developed naturally. Think about it this way. My brain is convinced that it is in a female body. However, my body really is male, and that has resulted in a great deal of distress. The surgery will bring my body close to being in line with the way that my brain is hardwired.

MC: How did you feel about actually taking the steps toward having a sex change?

JM: Right now, I am just 23 days away from my surgery (and by the time this interview is published, I will be well on the road to recovery). Looking back, it really has been a very challenging ordeal, and anyone considering this transition really needs to evaluate their reasons for needing—not wanting—to transition. The transition process is filled with unbelievable pain, both physically and mentally. But for those of us who could not imagine life any other way, this really is a last resort option other than the alternative of ending and wasting an otherwise wonderful life that we have the privilege of living.

MC: What was the hardest part about the transition? Why?

JM: Two aspects stand out as being the hardest part of my own transition. The first was right in the beginning. Plucking up the courage to step outside one's front door for the very first time, knowing that you probably look completely ridiculous, but in the same way as children and teenagers learn their own "dress sense," so do we have to learn what works and what doesn't. The other really sore point for me (quite literally) was laser hair removal. My pain threshold is not very high, and I can usually be heard describing it as "paid torture" sessions. For me, though, the results have been well worth the trouble.

MC: What was the best part of the transition? Why?

JM: The best part of the transition has been my increase in self-confidence. I have really come to enjoy helping others going through this transition, as well as people going through other completely unrelated transitions. For the first time in my life, I can confidently say that I am happy with the person that I am. I want others to be able to experience this level of happiness and self-satisfaction, which is why I have been speaking at conferences, and agreeing to interviews such as this. And this opportunity to be able to connect with the South African transgender community is definitely also a highlight.

MC: How would you want to inspire other people going through the same? Why?

JM: This transition, like so many others, is about growing as a person. Transitions of any kind are always a challenge, but what would life be without some good challenges to face along the way? When I first started down this road just over two years ago, I had imagined

that I might be where I am today only around 2011 at the earliest. I embraced the challenge and surprised even myself. That said, don't rush anything. Take as much time to process the change in your mind.

When I look at my old photos, I even find it hard to believe that the person in the photo is me. Not only has my appearance changed, but I am also a much happier person. And I think that is the bottom line: I finally feel like a person.

For those wishing to know more about me and my journey, or wish to ask any questions, please visit my website at www.JessicaMcKinnon.com