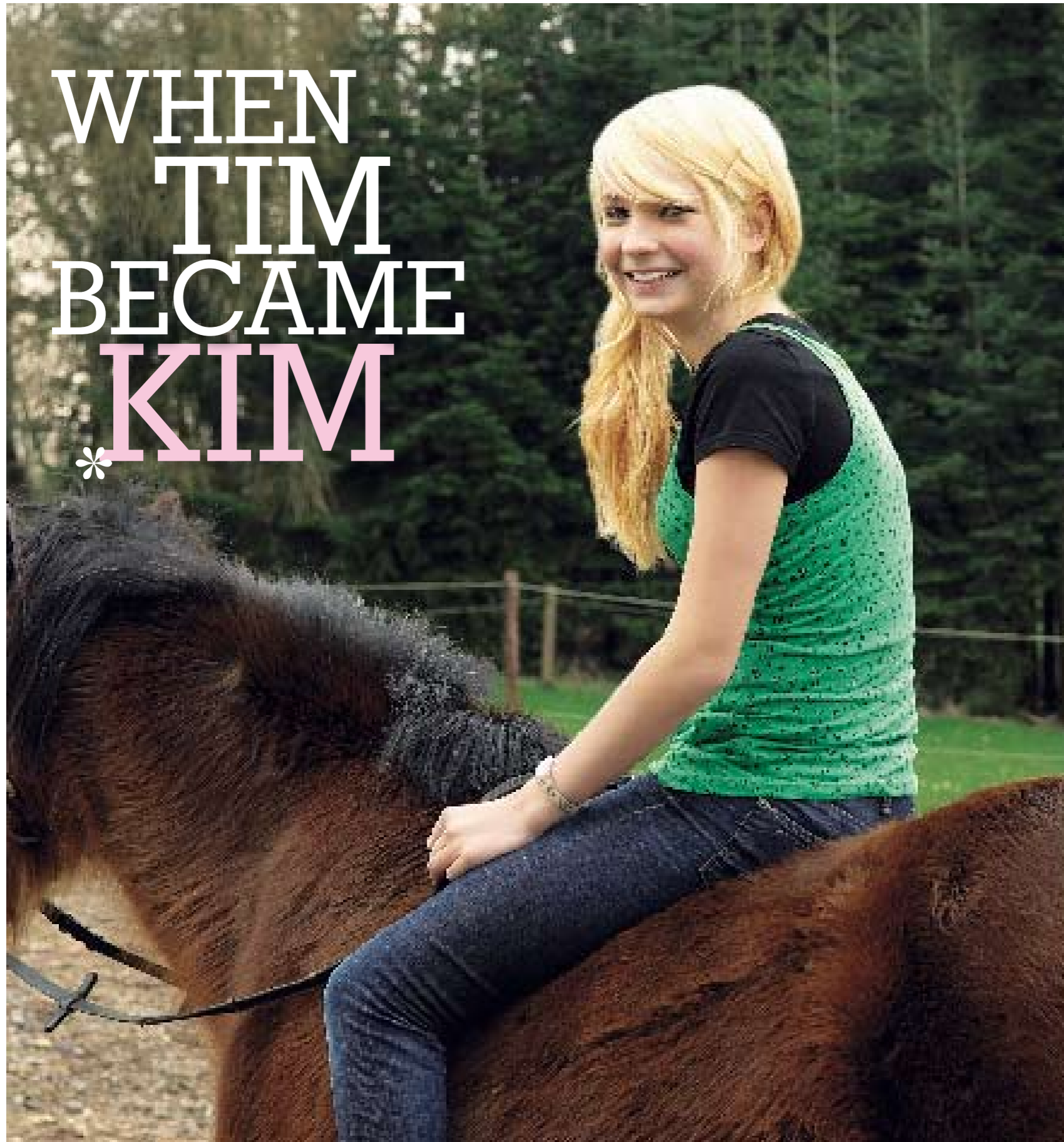


WHEN TIM BECAME KIM



At the age of five, he tried to cut off his penis, at six he was wearing dresses.

Meet Kim (formerly Tim) Petrus, the world's youngest sex-change patient. Here Kim, 14, and her mother Corina tell their amazing story. Words Allan Hall Cologne Photographs Mattias Jung



KIM SAYS

'My earliest memory is of being in the bath with my older sisters. I looked down at my private parts, then at those of the girls and thought: "I want to be like them."

I wasn't supposed to be a boy. My parents told me that when I was in my pram, people would comment on what a pretty girl I was. As I got older, wearing boys' clothes just felt wrong. A little voice in my head constantly whispered, "You are in the wrong body." I can only describe it as an emotional tugging.

I hated playing football or messing around with train sets. All I ever wanted were the Barbie dolls that belonged to my older sister Karina. I jealously watched her combing Barbie's hair, and snuck into my sisters' rooms when they were out to try on their clothes.

As I got older, Mom and Dad started to worry because I only wanted to be friends with girls. Every night, I'd climb into bed, asking God why he had made me the wrong sex. One day, at the age of five, I asked my mom if I could have an operation to cut off my boys' bits. If she was shocked, she didn't show it. A few days later she caught me with her scissors trying to cut my penis off.

My parents tried everything to convert me. They enrolled me in a boys' swimming club and bought me a mountain bike. I remember Dad saying, "Look, Tim, it's fun to be a boy too!" But he was fighting

FINDING HERSELF

Left Kim looking beautiful at 14, after starting hormone therapy. Above When she was Tim: on a merry-go-round as a toddler.



Even before taking hormones, Kim easily passed as a girl.

'I WAS BULLIED BY BOYS WHO SAID "YOU'RE JUST A GIRL". I'D SAY, "YES I AM," WHICH CONFUSED THEM' – KIM

a losing battle. Sometimes they lost their temper with me. On one occasion, I refused to go out unless I could wear one of my sister's pink dresses. My parents were at a loss as to what to do. I know now that they were trying to protect me from other people's reactions, although for a long time they presumed it was a toddler quirk. In the end, they allowed me to dress as a girl in the safety of our house and I started calling myself Kim at home – a name I chose myself. But, when we went out, I had to become Tim again.

At school, I was constantly bullied by boys who named me "Tranny Tim" and "Sissyboy". They said, "You're just a girl." The funny thing is, I wouldn't deny it. I'd say, "Yes I am," which confused them. My dad asked the headmaster if I could use the girls' loo. He refused, but allowed me to use the teachers' toilet because I was petrified of going into the boys' one.

When I was 11, I started wearing tight pants to hide the bulge in my trousers. My voice was breaking and I was growing facial hair. It was as though an alien had taken over my body and I was constantly fighting it. I could see it was disturbing my parents and I'd hear them discussing it. They could see how terrified I was about becoming a man, and they were tolerant enough to explore what I was going through. We trawled the Internet for information about sex-change clinics.

Not everyone was as understanding. I remember our GP shouting at my father in disgust: "How could you possibly think about a sex change for a child?" For the past three years, I've been constantly bombarded with questions from psychiatrists, asking me my views on my mother, whether I'd ever been in love, my opinion of my

WHAT'S THE PROFESSIONAL OPINION?

* Cape Town psychologist Johann Verster debunks some of the myths about when a child's behaviour is 'normal' and when it's not. "Transsexualism is considered the most severe of the gender identity afflictions. It starts very early in childhood (two to four years) and is seldom a passing phase. The most persistent feature is the child's repugnance with his or her genitals and a deep-seated wish to have them changed. Unlike transvestism (the need to dress like the opposite gender), transsexualism is not merely identification with the role, clothing and mannerisms of the opposite gender, but a full identification with the physical body of the opposite gender. Little boys may therefore insist on sitting while urinating and girls may attempt to stand. They may also refuse to attend school or activities where they are forced to identify with their own gender; at the same time they may go to great lengths to participate in activities of the opposite gender. So, when should a parent take action? It is normal for children to experiment with gender orientation – for little boys to play with dolls' clothes for instance, or girls to wear only boys' clothes. Usually

penis. I felt humiliated. For the first time in my life they made me feel dirty. It really upset me, like it was my fault.

While I was 11, I managed to get an appointment with Dr Meinburg, a renowned gender expert based in Frankfurt. Dr Meinberg confirmed what I'd always felt: that I was in the wrong body and always had been. I can't describe my relief on hearing this. Mum and Dad were confused, but relieved to finally see me happy. We got the permission of two doctors and I was prescribed special drugs to stop puberty. I'll take these until I reach 18, when I'll be allowed the final operation to remove my penis and create a woman's sex organs. I'll have to stay on female hormone pills for the rest of my life.

Today I am experiencing puberty as a young woman and it's a fantastic feeling. I'm developing breasts and my facial hair has disappeared, although I don't have periods. I know my schoolmates still whisper behind my back, but even my attitude to the bullies has changed. If people want to be spiteful that's their problem, not mine. In the last few months, I've started feeling attracted to boys. However, I wouldn't do anything about it until my sex change at 18.

I've never had a moment's doubt that this is the right thing to do. Those who know and love me see me as the girl I am inside. The other day, my oldest sister Angela said to me, "You have always been my younger sister and never my brother." I just wish the rest of the world was so accepting.'

KIM'S MOTHER CORINA SAYS

'Tim may have been born a boy, but I've no doubt that she always should have been Kim. I knew something wasn't quite right when she began to express her emotions. My husband Lutz and I spent



Kim was encouraged to take up 'male' hobbies, but they held little interest.

hours discussing how feminine our son was, but the "passing phase" seemed to go on and on. It was very stressful because we knew he'd face ridicule and criticism. But, like all parents, we were determined to love our children for the people they were – whether male or female.

From the age of three, Kim insisted on doing ballet. And I remember her throwing the most terrible tantrum when I tried to cut her hair and convince her that, as a boy, she couldn't have it shoulder-length. She sobbed for hours. You didn't need to be a doctor to see there was something wrong.

The biggest struggle was with the attitudes of our parents. My mother took me aside and said, "You need to make Tim behave like a boy. You're not trying hard enough." Lutz's parents were even worse. No-one could possibly understand. Over and over again, we tried to give Kim traditional male interests. But she was so upset by the idea of acting like a boy it broke our hearts. Like any parents, our overriding instinct was to keep our baby happy.

Asking for professional help was hugely difficult. It was heartbreaking dragging Kim to



Kim taking in the sights at Europark in Rust, Germany, in 2004.

the onset of adolescence brings identification with the activities of their biological gender. The rule of thumb here is simply to be open to the child's choices. When a parent resists a son "behaving like a girl" this is often a reflection of the parent's own fears and expectations. Transsexualism on the other hand is relatively rare. When there is a persistent denial of genitals (or behaviour such as binding the breasts or penis in order to resemble the opposite gender), sensitive listening is critical. Parents would be well-advised to visit a gender specialist and, as seen in Kim's case, an understanding parent and early intervention can go a long way towards preventing severe psychological trauma.'



On the slopes during a family skiing trip in 2004.

psychiatrists and doctors who examined and analysed her. But we didn't want her to spend her life trapped, repressed and unhappy. Unsurprisingly, we faced lots of opposition from our parents and friends, who felt we were "turning" Tim into another sex. They said it was unnatural, that we should force her to accept being a boy. Unless you've been the parents of a child in this situation, you'll never understand how stressful it is.

Every day, Kim grows happier in her skin. Seeing how she has

developed, her fine sense of balance and charm, inner strength and beauty, fills me with pride. Today I think of Kim as my third and youngest daughter. Even her grandparents have started to come round. I've fully accepted that, after six years of hormone therapy, she'll have the sex-change operation she so desperately wants when she turns 18. In the meantime, the therapy is turning her, in all senses, into the beautiful young woman she was meant to be.'

'SEEING HOW SHE HAS DEVELOPED, HER CHARM, INNER STRENGTH AND BEAUTY, FILLS ME WITH PRIDE' – CORINA, KIM'S MOTHER

SA STORY:

'I NEVER FELT COMFORTABLE AS A BOY'



FROM JASON TO JESSICA

Clockwise from top right Jessica McKinnon at a holiday party in December 2006; Jason in the USA in 2006; Jessica pushing a friend's pram in June 2007; Jason at kindergarten in 1980.

Jason was born and raised in Cape Town, where he went to Westerford High School. Now known as Jessica McKinnon, she lives in Ashburn, Virginia, in the USA, and will undergo sex reassignment surgery in Trinidad, Colorado this year.

I never felt completely comfortable as a little boy – I much preferred the idea of being a girl. I was always smaller and weaker than other boys and was an easy target for bullies; I remember crying a lot in primary school. I would occasionally escape into our laundry room and secretly dress up as a girl. When puberty (and testosterone) kicked in, I hated the way my body was changing. I struggled to relate to boys, and most of my friends were girls.

When I was 24 years old, I met Charmaine. We instantly knew we were soul mates and a few months later we got married. Our marriage was full of reversal of gender roles: Charmaine would fix things around the house and attend to the braai when we had friends over; I would be in the kitchen making salads and talking to the wives.

In 2004 Charmaine and I were watching a documentary on sex changes and the penny dropped. When she saw the tears streaming down my face, Charmaine instinctively knew what they meant. I started researching the topic obsessively. Charmaine supported my need to express myself as a woman by lending me her clothes (at home only). Still the occasional cross-dressing

wasn't fulfilling my need – I longed to be a woman full-time. In 2005, when Charmaine assured me that she would support me through the transition, I was overjoyed.

Telling my family wasn't easy. For my mom the last few years have been a rollercoaster. But last year I received a birthday card from her addressed to my new name – a sign that she's accepted me. I also told management at work, who then informed all staff through a carefully worded memorandum. Most of my colleagues were supportive so my transition was nonthreatening.

From mid-2005 I slowly stepped into my new life as Jessica: I pierced my ears, shaved my beard, and started going out in public as a woman. In May 2006 I started hormone therapy and by July 2006 I had made a permanent transition from Jason to Jessica. By the time this article is published, I'll be recovering from surgery. Apart from the operations, there's also the emotional pain and hurt – it was devastating to lose Charmaine (she met another man and it was only fair on her to divorce, but we remain good friends), and I lost friends and hurt my family. But for the first time in my life I can confidently say I'm happy and comfortable with the person I am.' ■

'MY WIFE SUPPORTED MY NEED TO EXPRESS MYSELF AS A WOMAN BY LENDING ME HER CLOTHES'