



PHOTO: KELTIE LARTER

Imagine you're a guy born in the body of a girl.

Even though you'd self-identify as being male, you'd still have to wear a bra, other guys would try to hit on you, you'd bleed from your vagina for several days every month, and you'd have to get a pap smear once a year. For most women, these things are all part of the rite of passage of becoming a woman.

But not for Camosun student Dani Desrosiers. He's a first-year environmental tech student at Camosun. He was also born a she.

#### A hard start

"I've definitely always known something was up," says Desrosiers.

Desrosiers grew up in the small town of Kamloops, BC. Kamloops is not a town where it's socially acceptable to be queer, and certainly not to be transgendered. So he hid his desire to be a male, and continued to live as Danielle Desrosiers.

It's not uncommon for transgender people to feel like they need to hide their sexuality, according to David Reagan, who teaches a class about human sexuality at Camosun.

"We make a huge mistake in our society when we look at sexuality as male and female, because so many people don't fall into those categories," says Reagan. "It's much healthier to look at human sexuality as a spectrum from what I call the extreme male to the extreme female."

Using standard labels to describe someone's sexuality doesn't take into account each person's individuality, says Reagan, and results in discrimination, or even worse. "It causes a lot of pain and suffering in our society because people who want to express their sexuality are sometimes so brutalized... It just breaks my heart."

Despite the fact that Desrosiers spent most of his life as a female, he's never had a sexual relationship with a man. "I'm like most guys," he says. "The thought of being with another guy is just not there for me."

A couple of years ago, Desrosiers fell in love with a girl.



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She loved him back. In order to keep up appearances, he and his girlfriend both asked male dates to their high school prom.

"As soon as our parents left we were like, 'Okay, see ya!' to our dates, and then we just danced together," says Desrosiers.

Although he had previously come out to his parents as a lesbian, it's not something the family talks about. "They're just ignoring it, hoping it'll go away," says Desrosiers. "They think I'm going to grow out of it, that it's just this one girl, that she's corrupting me. But it's not just this one girl; it's every girl."

#### You're not alone

Last summer Desrosiers discovered YouTube. "I started using it and searching female to male transitions," he says. "People profile themselves and profile their changes and it's so useful because you can see the effects instead of just reading about them. You can see how their face changes, their voice deepens, and they get hairier."

**"We make a huge mistake in our society when we look at sexuality as male and female."**

**DAVID REAGAN**  
CAMOSUN COLLEGE

Although he's not a fan of labels, Desrosiers felt he could identify with the transgendered people he saw on YouTube. "I thought to myself, 'Wow, there are other people like me out there,'" he says with a smile.

Then Desrosiers' girlfriend was accepted to the University of Victoria, so he packed up his bags and joined her in the move.

Desrosiers also decided that the time had come to start the transition from female to male. "I'm excited to transition," he says. "I love Victoria, and it'll be a lot easier to transition here than it would be in Kamloops."

# Stepping out of the shadows

## Transgender men tell their stories

By Keltie Larter  
Staff Writer

Desrosiers says he's noticed other people on campus who may be transgender, but hasn't yet felt comfortable striking up friendships.

"It's awkward to take that first step toward communication. Like, 'Oh, hi. Were you born in the wrong body too? Cool, let's hang out.' It's awkward," he says.

And Desrosiers is pleasantly surprised by the number of transgender people in the area, compared to Kamloops. "There are a lot of transgender people here and in Vancouver," he says. "There are just so many."

He's also noticed that people in Victoria seem to be more accepting of transgender people.

"People here seem to care less. I've told people and they're like, 'Oh, yeah, that's cool. Back to studying.' It's not a big deal to them," says Desrosiers.

Desrosiers' girlfriend is on board with his decision to transition.

"She's been really great," he says. "As much as I haven't had support from my parents, I have had support from her. She even bought me a video camera so I could document my transformation and put it on YouTube," he says with a shy grin.

#### Mommy, I want to be a boy when I grow up

Before he left Kamloops, Desrosiers tried to talk to his family about being transgender. The response was not good.

"It's a taboo subject, but I brought it up a while ago," he says. "My mom, she just said, 'No.' And it's not just about being trans," he adds. "It's about any degree of being queer."

Desrosiers' parents worry he won't fit into their lives after he transitions. "If I ever go back to Kamloops they wonder what's going to happen to the first 20 years of my life. You can't just make that disappear," he says.

But it's not enough to put him off. "Sure, the high school grad reunion's going to be awkward, but I don't think that's a reason not to go ahead with it."

Although Desrosiers dresses like a guy and has short hair, not everyone realizes he's transgender. Sometimes people think he's a butch woman, sometimes they think he's a guy, and sometimes they're just not sure what to think. He often gets called a girl, but that doesn't bother him.

"I prefer male pronouns, but right now I look like a female, and it confuses people, so it doesn't bother me too much," he says. "But I'd like to be seen as a male in the future because that's how I see myself."

As a pre-transformed transgender person, Desrosiers lives in a kind of limbo world that only recognizes male or female.

"I have the world's smallest bladder and every time I go to the bathroom and see the women's sign on the door, my heart aches, but you know... whatever. I still have to use it for my safety and for other people's comfort," he says.

"I sometimes get looks [in the bathroom] because I wear my hat and baggy jeans," he continues, "so the odd time when I'm bending over and my breasts are covered, someone will ask me what I'm doing in the girl's washroom, and then I stand up and they notice my chest. I just laugh about it afterward. I can't take it too seriously."

But Desrosiers doesn't regret being born a girl. "I sometimes say I was born in the wrong body, but, in a way, if I'd been born a boy, my life would be so much different. I would be less complete. I wouldn't have had to go through all of this, and I really like what it has taught me."

"I think if I'd been born a male I'd have gone around saying things like 'fag' and 'homo' like all the other guys, and I just wouldn't think about it," he continues. "I love being involved in the queer community here."

Despite their discomfort in regards to Desrosiers' sexuality, his parents have asked him to talk to them in person before starting hormone treatment.

He's decided it's time to have the talk.

"The whole family thing is the only thing holding me back from transitioning right now," he says. "I'm going back to Kamloops to talk to my parents about it because I promised them that I would talk to them face to face before I did hormones."

Desrosiers is nervous about what's going to happen. "They obviously don't approve of it," he says, "so I don't know what they're going to throw at me, but my plan is to get started with my transition when I get back."

What Desrosiers means by getting started with his transition is that he'll make an appointment with a doctor who will hopefully diagnose him with Gender Identity Disorder (GID). And if he can be diagnosed with this "disorder," Canada's Medical Services Plan (MSP) will pay for his hormone treatments.

He hopes this will help his family come to terms with his sexual identity.

"Maybe if I can be diagnosed with GID and my parents could talk to a doctor, hopefully they'll realize I'm not just being dramatic, that this is real," he says.

And that's just the tip of the gender-transformation iceberg.

#### Becoming a man

Alex Do Souto grew up in Victoria. He's 14 months into his transformation. "It usually takes about three years for you to become hormonally complete," he says.

During the 14 months that he's been taking hormones, Do Souto's jaw has widened, his face has become broader, his voice has deepened, he's become hairier, and his muscles have grown.

Lynn Mullally, a friend of Do Souto's, says the change is astounding. "I barely recognize him," she says. "It's amazing, really."

But taking male hormones also has some unpleasant side effects.

"Everything changes," says Do Souto. "Your body, your emotions, your cognitive ability; everything. Because your emotional responses change so drastically in such a short time, your body doesn't understand what's happening, so it just sort of turns them off. For the first six months to a year, you feel sort of emotionless, like you're a shell."

However, hormone treatments are very effective for female-to-male transitions. "We're like ninjas," jokes Do Souto. "You wouldn't know unless we were right beside you."

And the changes don't stop there.

Do Souto explains that one of the biggest differences in becoming a man is how others treat you.

"One of the first things you realize as a person who goes between genders is that you're being treated differently, and it's kind of startling. It sort of reinforces that this is definitely a male-dominated society," he says. "Like when you go to dinner, they always hand you the check, or when you go to the doctor's office they're a little more forward with you; and in clubs, you're treated with more respect by the staff. Sometimes it's helpful, but at times it's disgusting."

Like many transgender people, Do Souto has identified as a male since he was a child.

"You know the way a fixed gendered person knows; you just do," he says. "I knew watching cartoons that I wanted to grow up and be like Luke Skywalker or Superman, and at no point did I think to myself, 'Hey, wait, it's not really going to work out like that.'"

Do Souto continues, "I totally thought it was possible for me to grow up to be a boy. I thought, 'It'll be fine; I'm going to hit puberty and grow a penis.' But then you hit puberty and that's not what happens. And even though you know it's real, there's part of you that refuses to believe what's happening. You think it must be just a cruel joke."

Do Souto came out to his parents as a lesbian when he was 15. "A lot of guys don't realize exactly what's wrong to begin with. You just think, 'Oh well, I'm super masculine, maybe I'm just a lesbian,'" he says. "It didn't go over very well. I got in a big fight with my dad. He kicked me out of the house, so I jumped out the second story window, ran away, and never came back."

**"We're like ninjas; you wouldn't know unless we're right beside you."**

**ALEX DO SOUTO**  
TRANSGENDER MAN

Although Do Souto has recently been in contact with his family again, it's a tentative peace. "They still call me by my birth name and they refuse to use male pronouns," he says. "They're seeing counselling about it, but he's a Christian counsellor, so I don't really know how much that's going to help."

But, like Desrosiers, Do Souto doesn't regret his experiences. "It was good in some ways," he says.

"You're forced to grow up really fast. If I could've just slacked off in high school like most teenagers, I probably wouldn't be where I am today."

Today, Do Souto works three jobs while he saves up for "top" surgery; he's also recently been approved for a hysterectomy.

Although MSP covers most of the cost of his hormones, they only contribute about \$1,500 towards having a mastectomy and reconstructive pectoral surgery, which can cost anywhere from \$4,000 to \$10,000.

Do Souto will be going to a doctor in Baltimore, Maryland for his "top" surgery, which will cost him close to \$10,000.

"I'm a perfectionist, and [my breasts are] so small as it is that the surgery is a bit more complicated in my case. [The doctor] in Baltimore is well known as one of the best. There'll be almost no scarring; you won't even be able to tell after about a year," he says.

Do Souto explains that a complete transformation, including "top" surgery and a mastectomy, can mean up to two years of painful surgeries and a lifetime of hormone treatment drugs. "You can't rush it along; your body goes at its own pace," he says.

Female-to-male transgender people also have the option of having "bottom" surgery, where doctors take a piece of skin from your forearm or thigh, and construct a, hopefully, functioning penis.

"One of the first changes you notice when you take the hormones is that your clit grows quite large and becomes

more sensitive," explains Do Souto. "Your body tries its very best to grow a penis, so they take what your body tries to make and build from there."

But "bottom" surgery can be expensive and dangerous. "There's a 50 percent fail rate, so a lot of trans guys don't do it," he says. "You can be left with a bunch of skin that you can't feel, so it's not a really great option."

So, for now, Do Souto is just looking forward to "top" surgery and a hysterectomy.

"To say I'm excited is an understatement," he says. "I'm waiting for a date from MSP right now, but it's looking like it will be the end of January for the hysterectomy, and for top surgery I'm looking at the end of March. Once that's done, it's done, and that's as far as I'm going to go at this point."

Desrosiers can't wait to start his transition. He's happy (and also in love) and wants people to know that he's not ashamed of who he is.

"It's hard, but I'm happy," says Desrosiers. "Things could definitely be worse. I could be living in another country, it could be illegal to have homosexual sex, or I could be going the other way, male to female; their options are pretty limited. My life could be worse in so many ways. I'm lucky."



Alex Do Souto as a woman.



Alex Do Souto as a man.

PHOTO: KELTIE LARTER