

Girlish boy confounds classmates

By Dan Sewell
The Associated Press

CARROLLTON, Ga. — Patrick Nelson had heard there was a cross-dressing boy enrolled at his high school. But darned if he could figure out just who it was.

"I looked for him the first couple weeks. The honest truth — I didn't even know," Patrick said.

One day, he was talking about the mystery to a friend, who smiled and pointed to the pretty blonde at the desk next to his.

"I said, 'No way, that's too weird!'" Patrick recalled. "Then I thought about it, and I said, 'So what's so weird about that?'"

But while Patrick and his friends were willing to accept Matthew "Alex" McLendon's feminine appearance and mannerisms, others in this rural, conservative western Georgia community of about 20,000 weren't.

And so 15-year-old Alex withdrew from school under pressure, leaving supporters of the popular, easygoing student wondering what threat they had supposedly been protected from.

"Alex wasn't causing any problems. She got along well with everybody," said classmate and friend Meayghan Denkers. "She wasn't trying to change anybody to be like her or anything."

After a heated meeting of the board of the small, private Georgian Country Day School on Oct. 6, Alex was "invited to withdraw" or face expulsion. Alex, who had enrolled in September after attending public school, was cited for wearing a tongue ring, but had been called before school authorities earlier about his female dress, makeup and hairstyle.

Most of Alex's classmates — including some of the boys — wore bows in their hair in protest until ordered to remove them by the principal. Some indignantly quoted their school handbook, which urges acceptance of "diversity in opinion, culture, ideas, behavioral characteristics, attributes or challenges."

"Alex represents something that's way beyond the experience and the comfort zone of the very conservative people we live with," said Lori Lipoma, Meayghan's mother and a drama teacher at the school. "I really think we all lost something very precious that night."

School officials would not discuss the case.

"We make no comments on students," said Rex Camp, chairman of the board of the school, where tuition is more than \$5,000 a year for the 50 or so high school students. Kindergarten and elementary students are in a separate building, but one parent of a 6-year-old expressed concern at the board meeting about Alex's effect on younger children.

"I believe in sexual standards in society, and I want my child in a school that holds the same sexual ethics that I do," said Craig Neal.

Alex, who speaks in a soft, feminine voice, began cross-dressing two years ago and considers himself "95 percent girl."

Larry Harmon, a Dade County, Fla., psychologist who counsels patients on sexual identity, said such feelings appear to fit a rare condition called gender-identity disorder. He said it doesn't necessarily imply homosexuality, and it's difficult to know how many youngsters have it and why.

"I'm not homosexual," Alex said. "I just look like a girl."



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