

**S**haron Boyd is fighting to see her kids in what has become a long and nasty legal struggle. She is transsexual and by all accounts was a good father. But the case, which is ever so slowly winding its way through Missouri courts, is pushing hot buttons of sexual identity, religion, family and politics. It has become a *cause célèbre* for conservative Christian activists. Now, for the first time in an extended interview, Sharon is telling her side of the story.

Tom and Karen met in Bible study class in western Missouri (the names are pseudonyms, first used in an article in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*). He was a solid six-footer with dark hair and big brown eyes, an honors graduate of the Air Force Academy whose finger could launch atomic warheads onto another continent. They married and had two sons, moving to Germany and then the suburbs of Washington, D.C., over the course of Tom's 12-year military career.

But Tom had a secret from childhood, a secret that society and his evangelical Christian upbringing taught him to deny. He knew that "there was something wrong with the way I looked, I just wasn't comfortable with it." Even before puberty he would sneak into his mother's room and don her lingerie, or later purchase and wear items of women's clothing in binge/purge cycles, struggling with his own demons of cross dressing.

Sharon remembers, "By 1991 or so, I just couldn't take any more. If it was a cross to bear, it was crucifying me, it was grinding me into dust."

When Karen and the boys went to visit family in Missouri, Tom stayed in Maryland and went to a therapist. "I think he gave me the freedom to admit, and the freedom to deal with the admission [that I might be a transsexual]," Sharon says.

Tom had shared his secret with Karen even before their marriage, and subsequent discussions over the years brought further stress to it. So he withdrew, keeping the issue to himself. But when Karen returned, he told her of his decision to continue exploring the likelihood that he was transsexual. The marriage deteriorated quickly, and within weeks Tom was sleeping in a separate room in the basement.

At Karen's insistence he "went to umpteen zillion different Christian counselors, who were quacks for the most part, who had the commonality of belief that it was just fundamentally immoral to be a transsexual or be a person with transsexual feelings." Some said, "We don't have any evidence of it, but it must have been because of something in your past, some 'Chester the Molester.'"

Others blamed a weak father, dominant mother, or the Devil.

"All of this smacked to me of the seven blind men who come upon the elephant and say, an elephant is very like a snake, or a wall, or a hose, or a tree," Sharon says. "They didn't know what

## A father's rights

*A transsexual's court battle to remain in contact with her children stirs up a right-wing ruckus*

by Bob Roehr



*"They are already manipulating legislatures and public opinion to short-circuit the judiciary. That is why I haven't had a contempt ruling or even a hearing for two years. If you remove the condition of transsexuality of one of the parents, they would have transferred custody ages ago."*

—Sharon Boyd

they were talking about. And they wanted me to trust my life, my well-being to this kind of insanity? Those kind of treatments are very focused on 'we've got to find out who to blame, and once we find out who to blame, we'll tell you how to take the silver bullet and slay the beast.'"

Karen and Tom separated in August 1992. Karen entered a no-fault divorce in Maryland before returning to Missouri, but withdrew it before it had run its one-year course. She later refiled in Missouri. Tom began the transition to becoming Sharon, a process made complete with surgery in November 1994.

The children initially were told only that their father was having "adult problems." About six months after the separation the oldest became

depressed and suicidal. The first grader was placed on Prozac.

The divorce decree, finalized in July 1995 by Judge William T. Lohmar Jr., clearly established Sharon as "a loving and caring father," and that it was in the best interest of the children to allow joint custody and visitation for the boys, now aged 7 and 10.

Karen enlisted the help of the Alliance Defense League, a legal offshoot of Focus on the Family, led by Colorado Springs religious conservative James Dobson. The league assisted with the case, and when the initial custody decision came down, the religious right launched a publicity campaign against the decision and the judge who issued it.

Sharon has researched the group and believes it sees this as "a precedent-establishing case. They got in it because they want to establish case law to take people's kids away from them." She lambastes what she calls the group's "attempt to coerce the court using extra-judicial pressure."

The right fired its public broadsides: "I am appalled that the court would allow [Sharon] to maintain all the rights of fatherhood while abandoning the biological and emotional responsibilities of fatherhood," said the Rev. John M. Cochran in the *Post-Dispatch*.

Judge Lohmar was defeated in his bid for reelection. An appeals court reversed the custody decision and severely limited visitation. Parallel legislation was introduced at the Capitol.

Sharon hasn't seen or talked with her children in the more than four years since the separation. "I agreed voluntarily not to have physical contact [with the boys for the first year]. I thought I was doing a good thing, but in retrospect, it was a big mistake, I was being taken advantage of," she says.

Her in-laws loved her as the wonderful husband Tom, "but when I changed my name to Sharon and I wore dresses, I became the anti-Christ. I don't think that is reasonable.... My 'crime' is that I successfully completed a regimen of treatment for a medical condition under my doctor's advice and orders."

She calls her foes "an organized enemy who want to take our children away from us because they think that we are bad parents based on our status. In their minds they make no distinction between gay, lesbian, transgender, bisexual. It is all the same to them and they are coming after us, they don't think that we should have our kids."

She adds, "They are already manipulating legislatures and public opinion to short-circuit the judiciary. That is why I haven't had a contempt ruling or even a hearing for two years. If you remove the condition of transsexuality of one of the parents, they would have transferred custody ages ago."

Sharon keeps getting teased, taunted really, with tentative arrangements for a phone conversation with the boys, but it always evaporates as the time draws near.

She believes that justice will be delayed even longer because "nobody wants to be on the record telling Karen that she has to go to jail for not obeying a court order" to allow the contact.

And Sharon fears that the issue has become so politicized that no judge wants to deal with it, hence they stall and delay.

Sharon says the experience has made her "stronger in myself. I've gotten closer to God, too. He has sustained me." She says she feels she doesn't have a choice: "I am going to be the enemy of injustice. My children are going to recognize me. They are going to be in touch, and I think we should be permitted to do that, for my sake and for their sake."



### Native American Gay and Bisexual Men

PROJECT RED TALON invites gay and bisexual Native American men to participate in a focus group. Topics will include: tribal/family acceptance; homophobia; HIV/AIDS; social networks; Native American culture; and other issues.

Earn \$25.00

Wednesday, June 11  
6:30-8:30 p.m.

The information will be used to develop HIV/AIDS prevention services for gay and bisexual Native American men in the greater Portland area.

To sign up, contact: Jay LaPlante, Northwest Portland Area Indian Health Board, (503) 228-4185. Co-sponsored by Cascade AIDS Project.



HOSTED BY THE ASIAN/PACIFIC ISLANDER LESBIANS AND GAYS (APLIG)

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The exhibit consists of 12 panels containing personal narratives of coming out accompanied by black and white photographic portraits of the interview subjects and their family members.

Design: Rachel Barua/RAISING EYE GRAPHICS



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5:30-7:30 PM

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Special thanks to the McKenzie River Gathering Foundation for providing financial support for this exhibit.