

CULTURE

If you wanted to change your gender, where would you start? Well, you might visit the three little shops in one building at 10140 S.E. Pine St.

In Suite A you'd find Sandi Knudson, 47, a transgendered woman. She can help you as she has helped so many others because she has been down this road herself.

About a year ago, she bought her first wig. "I knew what I wanted, but I didn't know how to progress," she says.

Knudson had cross-dressed secretly in the past but wanted more. She stopped into a wig shop and met Sandra Grohs, who helped her choose and style her first wig.

"I was dressed as a man," she recalls. "People came in the shop and saw me. I was very nervous."

Knudson was born and raised as a male but always had wanted to explore her feminine side. She was married and had a career in the Navy.

Buying the wig felt so good, she got acrylic nails applied. She returned to that shop every couple of weeks to redo the nails and care for her new wig. Soon, she was styling her own wig and liking it.

By last August, Knudson was living full-time as a woman and had become quite adept at women's hairstyles. She then changed her name from Doug to Sandi.

She had no trouble with the change at work and not much trouble at home. She still is married, and the couple plan to remain together.

This led to a surprise for Knudson as she walked down the sidewalk holding hands with her wife. "I was shocked to realize that people would think we were lesbians." After her surgery, she says, "We will be married lesbians!"

In December, she opened her little wig shop, Sandi's Two. "I am trying to help the transgendered community," she says, although she happily will style wigs for anybody.

The purpose of her shop is to offer the special services transgendered people need. She dreams of offering a total package of services to help men transition to women, occasionally or permanently.

Although Knudson's hair looked lovely and perfectly natural, she surprised me when she asked whether I could tell which part of her hair was a wig. I couldn't. She parted her hair and showed me that the front section was a partial wig designed to hide the receding hairline most men get.

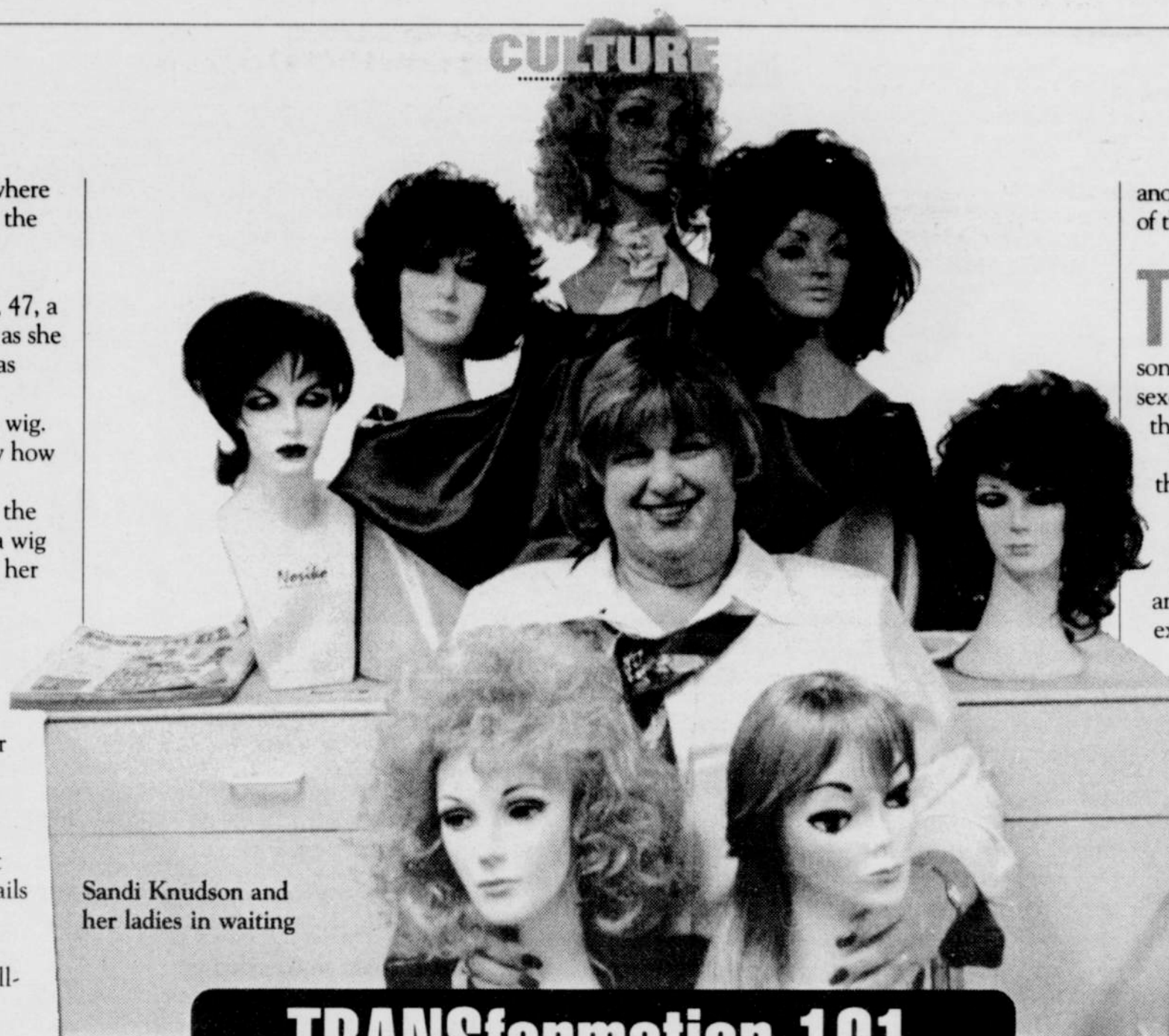
It is quite convincing when she combs it in with her real blond hair. She offers many such insights to her transgendered clients.

"Passing is these girls' biggest worry," she says. "We are always afraid that someone will know."

Knudson has spent many hours working with friends and clients to help them master the gestures and voice inflections they want. She recalls when womanly gestures were an effort for her.

She shared with me an incident she had at Meier and Frank. She was fighting over sale clothing with other women when a man wanted to push his shopping cart past, but she was in the way.

Furious, he shouted, "You bitch!" Knudson laughed in delight because she had passed.



Sandi Knudson and her ladies in waiting

TRANSformation 101

Community resources for gender reshaping

BY HERON



Donna is a satisfied customer of Sandi Knudson

In Suite D next to Sandi's Two is Wendy Dillon's shop, Delicate Touch Esthetics and Electrolysis. Although she has many straight clients, she offers special services to transgendered people.

A licensed esthetician, she provides skin care, waxing, tweezing, Euro-stone facials, glycopeels and ear candles. She also offers complete makeovers to her trans clients.

"Mom didn't teach these girls about makeup," Dillon deadpans. She explains that skin care is important to trans people because "men have larger pores than women."

She steams, plucks, massages, exfoliates and creams their faces until they are smooth and soft. Then, she applies makeup. "I paint a picture on canvas, but first I develop the canvas."

The Portland surgeon who performs sex-change operations, Dr. Toby Metzger, refers clients to Dillon for permanent reshaping of their pubic hair. Ouch. She assures me that she numbs the area first but that it does hurt a little.

She also can remove any trace of a beard.

Once you have your wig and face perfected, you may want to go to Beautiful Faces in Suite B. Tattoo artist Shauna Holder, 30, can apply any kind of body tattoo or piercing.

She reshapes male mouths into feminine lips and redesigns eyebrows permanently. She sometimes is called upon to tattoo areolas for transgendered breasts. Holder is straight but queer- and trans-friendly.

But wait, there's more! Behind the doors at Authentic Creations in a discreet North Portland home, magic happens. Gender magic. In the artful hands of Christina Fletcher, gender is transformed.

She tells her story with a faraway look

that is still slightly sad. "My journey began when my husband came out."

Fletcher, 59, was born into show business. After immigrating to the United States from Munich, Germany, she studied makeup at the Metropolitan Opera in New York. She has a long and colorful history in wig making and makeup as head designer for the Orlando Opera Company and as wig master at Disney World for seven years.

After moving to Portland 10 years ago, she worked on feature films for the Lifetime Channel. She also styled hair for Mr. Holland's Opus and Men of Honor, which were shot in Portland. She has done hair and makeup for Lynn Redgrave, Deirdre Hall, Raymond Burr, Vincent Price and legendary wig aficionado Phyllis Diller.

But the big story of Fletcher's life began when her husband of 40 years, an Air Force veteran, came out to her as a gay man. In shock, she thought it was a phase, a midlife crisis. "At first I thought, 'He'll get over it.'"

She and her husband had been quite close. She thought she had a happy marriage. He had been her date to the senior prom, for Pete's sake.

The shock left her in tremendous pain and terribly confused. "I was at the point of suicide," she says.

At that point in her life, Fletcher, like the overwhelming majority of heterosexuals, knew nothing about the queer community. But 15 years later, she now has a whole new outlook. "I have not lost a husband, I have gained two brothers."

It says something wonderful about her character, I think, that she and her husband have remained close, even though they are separated and he has a partner. Her struggle to understand her husband's coming out led her to explore the realms of gender.

Now, she is a treasure to the cross-dressing and transgender communities. She uses her theatrical and artistic skills to transform her clients from one gender to another. Although one-third of her clients are actors and one-third are straight,

another third are people who spend at least some of their time as members of another gender.

Tommie Henderson is one of Fletcher's success stories. She defines "transgendered" as "an overall umbrella classification for persons such as cross-dressers, transsexuals, intersexed individuals or anyone concerned with the issues of gender identity."

The 66-year-old transsexual is a member of the Northwest Gender Alliance, which welcomes all of the above to attend meetings and become members. "In fact, Lon Mabon could be a member since he seems to have an intense interest in gender identity and expression," she quips.

Henderson has used Fletcher's services for a male-to-female makeover and admires her for more than her artistic talent. "I would feel very secure in saying that anyone who has met Christina would have nothing but the highest regard for her. At times, the variations within the sexual minority community are at odds with each other, and at those times I would point out Christina as a role model, since she is not a member of this community but accepts them all as nonjudgmentally as first and foremost human beings."

Fletcher says she has worked on about 100 transgendered people, mostly men who want to look like women. She starts by studying the features of each client. Are the bones heavy? The nose large? The jaw masculine? Then, she goes to work with special creams and makeup to soften a little here, reshape there, disguise elsewhere.

Next, she studies the client's coloring. "I use natural coloring to enhance the person's features," she says.

Fletcher interprets each individual's personality style. Vibrant? Shy? She applies the makeup that will complement whatever femininity is there.

"I redesign each face," she says. "Every face is different."

She then teaches each client to apply her own makeup. She is not in business to sell makeup but does supply Hollywood Magic theatrical creams, which are not available in Portland.

Fletcher is also a wigmaker. She fits and styles each wig for each client. She also teaches them how to care for their new hair.

Of course, she can cut hair, too. She told me about a haircut that can be combed to look feminine or masculine.

But she does not stop there. Fletcher also ladles out the loving support transgendered people need. She knows some of her clients put their lives on the line to be who they are.

"They risk loss of family, jobs, everything," she says. "I have seen men trembling in my salon chair with tears in their eyes. These men are so unhappy with what they see each day in the mirror."

Fletcher understands their needs. "I tell each client, 'You will see the person that is inside you.'"

People who sit in her salon chair can be assured of total respect and anonymity. "I am one of the few people that they can confide their deepest fears to." ■



Tommie Henderson