

LIVING LA VIDA MEDEA

Meet Reid Vanderburgh, Portland's first openly trans psychotherapist

by Sarah Leimert

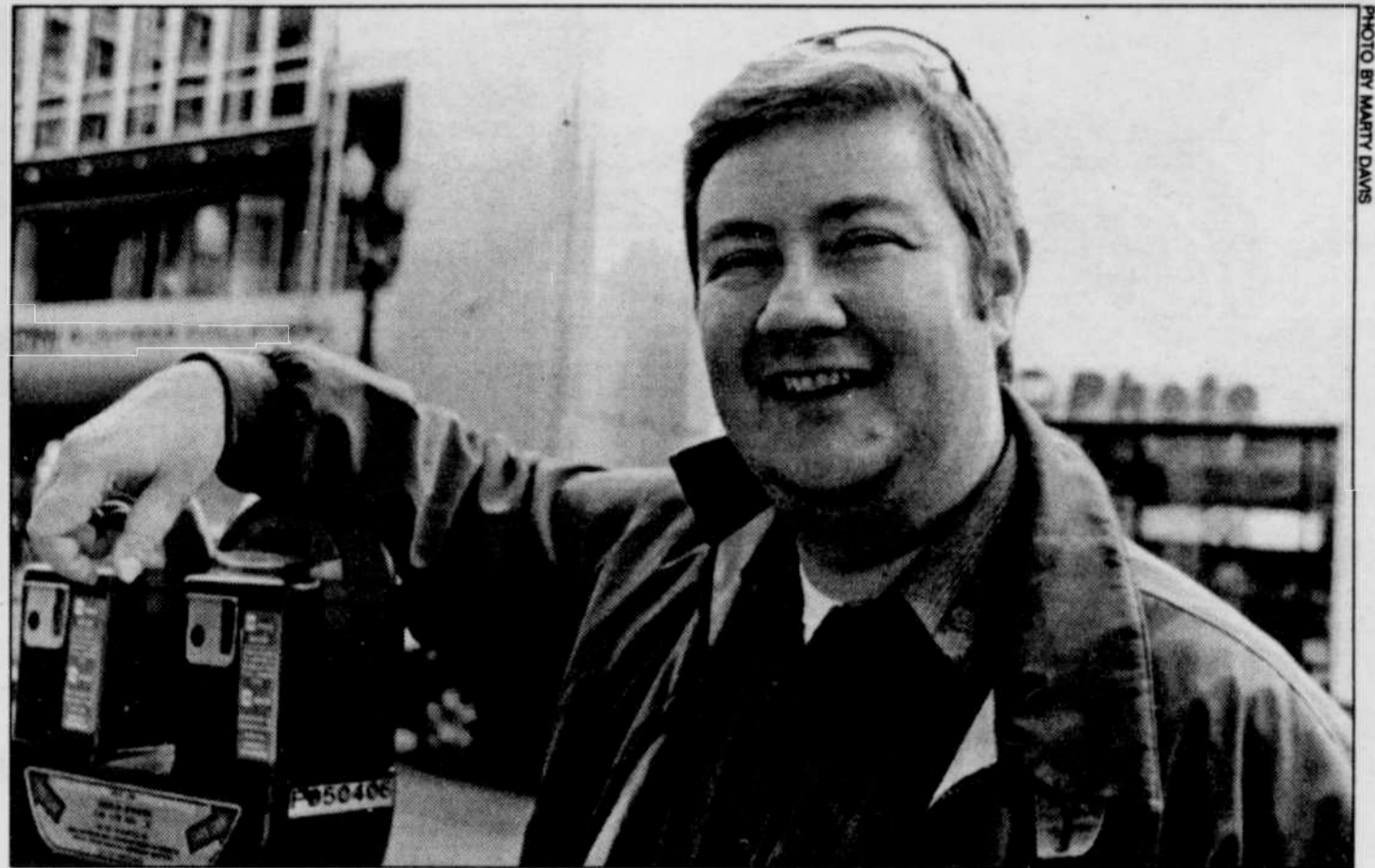


PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS

Reid Vanderburgh specializes in working with clients who are "undergoing major life transformations"

Reid Vanderburgh's decision to become a therapist was inspired by a Hunter S. Thompson quote: "When the going gets weird, the weird go pro."

Portland's first openly trans psychotherapist was a 39-year-old lesbian at the time. His inspiring coming-out story has culminated in a successful career in transpersonal psychology, or what Vanderburgh calls "holistic psychotherapy." He recently received his master's degree from John F. Kennedy University's Graduate School for Holistic Studies and now is practicing in downtown Portland.

Vanderburgh specializes in working with clients who are "undergoing major life transformations." He does not limit his services to people who are considering transition; he also deals with shifting sexual orientations, loss of spouse or partner, addiction recovery processes and anything else that "requires reinventing who you are from the ground up." In the two years he has been seeing clients, he estimates roughly half of them have been trans.

During the '90s, the former Nancy Vanderburgh was a founding member of the feminist newspaper *Rag Times*, Portland Women's Theatre Company, Bridges Vocal Ensemble and Portland Lesbian

Choir. "I didn't take too kindly to the realization that I'd probably be happier living as a guy," he says. "I had quite a life built up in the Portland lesbian community...and leaving that group was not on my horizon."

Vanderburgh never had fantasies about being male; he simply "never felt completely at home in [his] skin as a female." He was uncomfortable with identifying as a lesbian or as a woman. "I was full of contradictions and felt an enigma to myself—not an easy life for a Virgo," he recalls. Mainstream beliefs about trans people also

weighed heavily on Vanderburgh as he struggled to find a place for himself in society. "I had some vague equation of 'transsexual' and 'drag queen' as synonymous, which of course had made it impossible for me to recognize myself as transsexual earlier in my life. I've loathed feminine clothing for as long as I can remember, which is hardly the attitude of a drag queen!"

One day in 1995, Vanderburgh's then-partner revealed her own struggle with the same issue—that she always had felt like a man inside. This conversation inspired him to change his negative attitudes about being trans.

"I would probably still be living in denial had [my partner not come out to me]. It effectively held a mirror to my soul," he says.

Vanderburgh spent the next two years postponing a physical transition while the Portland Lesbian Choir recorded its first CD. In "gender limbo-land," he was known as male in some circles and female in others. "I felt split keenly," he

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—Reid Vanderburgh

remember, "never being able to quite integrate these various aspects of my life into one cohesive whole, despite the fact that I came out to everyone who was important to me."

After beginning hormones and going through top surgery, Vanderburgh found his life became much more simple. However, the physical transformation never felt fully complete.

"I had transitioned from female to not female," he says. "I'm living la vida medea—life in the middle. I have not crossed the bridge from

'female' on one side, over an immeasurable chasm, to become 'male' on the other side. Rather, I have become the bridge."

All of Vanderburgh's trans clients know that he, too, is trans before they contact him. "In most cases," he says, "they contact me because I'm trans."

Nontrans clients aren't specifically informed of Vanderburgh's identity, but he doesn't mind if they find out. The therapist determines self-disclosure on a case-by-case basis.

"If it's in the client's best interest that they know a particular fact about [me, I'll] go ahead and tell them.... This applies to all kinds of issues—sexual orientation, addiction recovery, parental status, religion, etc."

Vanderburgh also does volunteer work with Outside In, helping trans youth obtain gender-congruent legal identification and name changes through the state of Oregon. Some of the kids he encounters are transitioning at a very early age—often before they have fully developed—using hormones they buy on the street.

"I've heard people express concerns, questioning whether a 13-year-old, for instance, can possibly know for sure what their gender is. After all, they've only reached adolescence," he says. "I also believe that taking street hormones can be dangerous, just as any other street drug can be. However, I've known trans youth who were permitted by their parents and doctors to start hormones in their early teens, and their experience of adolescence is much happier than

it would be otherwise."

Vanderburgh believes the necessity for street drugs would be greatly reduced if legal services and parental support within a medical framework were available to transitioning youth. "This concern [also] expresses the societal confusion between gender identity and sexuality," a conflict he has lived with his whole life. "I would love to see trans people taken seriously enough that someday transition becomes an adolescent process."

Vanderburgh emphasizes that there is no "one size fits all" answer to how gender and sexuality are interrelated. "The fact is," he muses, "trans people are already 'who we truly are.' It's just that we can't completely modify our bodies to reflect our gender identities. How we face that...holds the key to how happy and fulfilled we can be living our lives as relational beings."

In addition to his psychotherapy practice and youth volunteer work, Vanderburgh also participates in presentations, panels and workshops on trans issues. "Obviously I can't see every trans client in the world, so I feel I can make even more of a difference if I educate the therapists," he says. Vanderburgh will be teaching a continuing education class March 7, 2003, at Portland State University for licensed mental health practitioners. ☐

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