



Transforming relationships

Partners of trans men and women share their stories of change

by Kathy Belge

Brenda Schellenberg and Devan Deuel had been dating for about three months when Devan felt safe enough to tell. Although female on the outside, Devan was trying to find the words to let Brenda know he felt like a man on the inside and was considering a sex change. Brenda misunderstood what Devan was trying to say and in her most supportive voice said, "But, honey, you're 100 percent woman to me!" Eight years later, they can laugh about it, but Devan, at the time, was crushed.

When a partner comes out as transsexual or transgender, the impact on a relationship can be devastating. Many if not most relationships do not survive. When someone comes out as trans, much like coming out as gay or lesbian, a huge personal transformation takes place. What few people recognize is that the partners also go through a transformation.

Adrienne Wolmark, a Portland therapist specializing in gender issues, says partners often get lost in the shuffle. She says it's important for partners to become educated about the process and to get support.

Here are personal stories, from the non-transitioning partners' point of view, of a few couples who've made it and a few who are still working hard to stay together. They share their triumphs, their struggles, their hopes and fears.

The women with male-to-female (MTF) partners felt free to use their partner's previous names and pronouns, and almost spoke

of them as if they were two different people. Those interviewed who have a female-to-male (FTM) partner used only the male pronoun and were very protective of his previous name.

Coming out

Portlanders Ani Haines and Steve Mitchell met at KBOO-FM, where they each served as the host of a radio program. Ani, 37, has identified as queer since high school. She was president of the women's union in college and co-founder of the lesbian alliance. Yet she found herself falling in love with Steve.

She was confused. Many of her lesbian friends had a hard time accepting that she was seeing a man. Although Ani struggled with her

identity, she knew that she and Steve had a connection that she could not deny.

Together, the two spent many hours talking about gender. "I'm a radical feminist," she says. "Studying gender and thinking gender has always been fascinating to me. I was really happy that I had this partner that was into thinking about gender at a really deep level with me."

As their relationship grew, Ani began to



Radical feminist and lesbian Ani Haines (left) was relieved to once again identify as a dyke when her boyfriend Steve (inset) came out as trans woman Theresa



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