

# ♀♂ Transforming relationships Continued from Page 25

Ani says of Theresa: "For the first six or seven years of our relationship, she would sit in the corner at a party. Now, it's hard to get her to leave a party. She's much more expressive and open. It's been wonderful getting to watch her blossom."

## Stressors

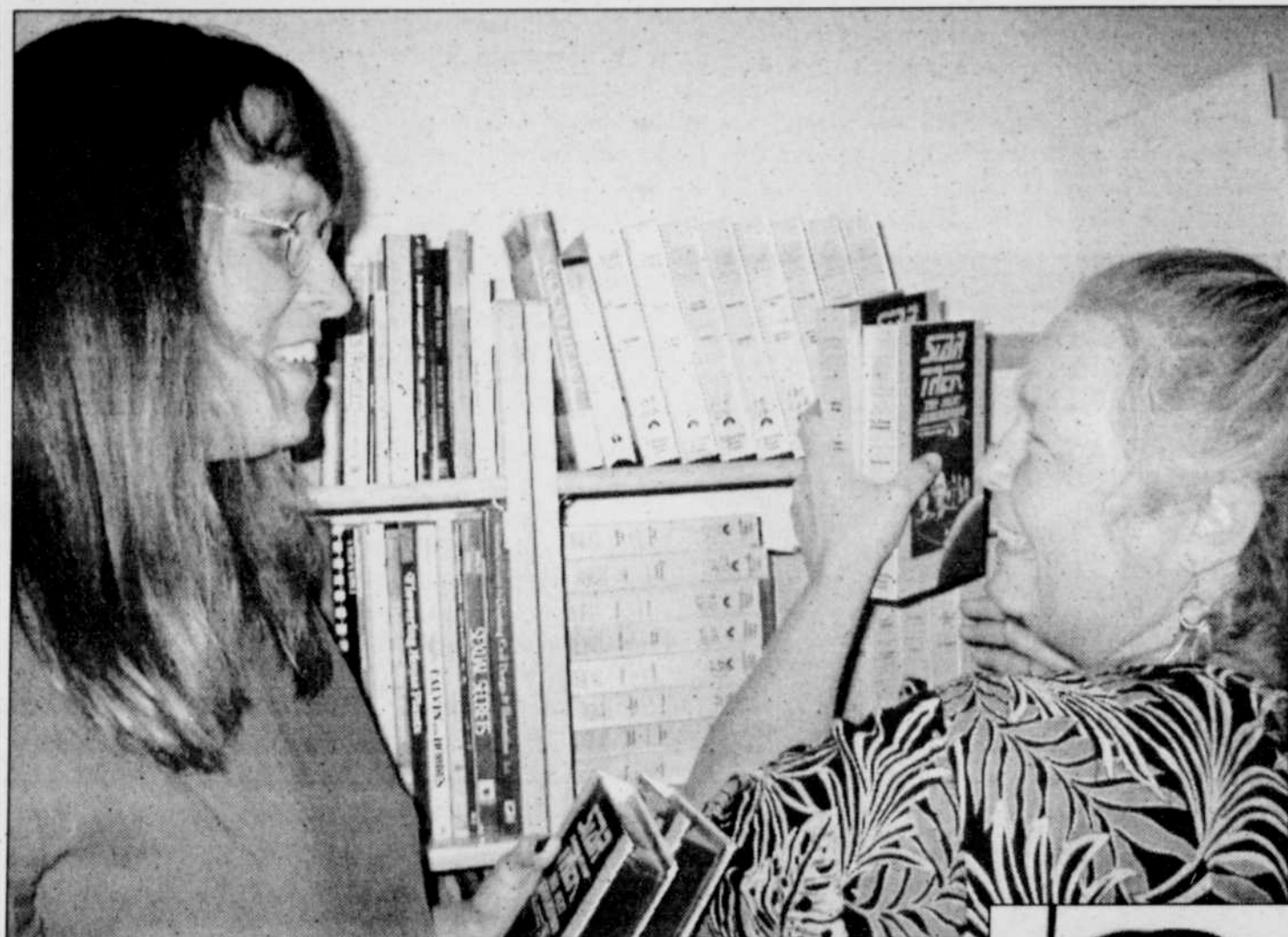
In addition to changing roles, other factors can cause stress on a transitioning relationship.

Jamie's partner Joe (not their real names) lost his job due to what they believe was trans discrimination. Because he was out of work, they decided this would be a good time for him to have breast reduction surgery. They borrowed money, depleted their savings and maxed out their credit cards for the \$7,000 procedure. Joe legally changed his name and identification from female to male. But with this new identity that had no previous work history, he could not find a job. After almost a year out of work, they resorted to creating a fake résumé with fake references.

Joe has finally landed a job and is working toward paying off his debt. But the stress of his year and a half out of work has taken its toll on their relationship. Joe struggled with depression, and Jamie struggled to support them both financially. Only recently has Jamie learned of a support group for significant others, something she wishes she had found sooner.

Wolmark says expenses related to surgery can be a challenge for some couples. Most insurance policies do not cover the cost of surgery or hormones. "For many, the hormones and surgery are an absolute life-or-death issue," she says. "But for a lot of partners, that might be hard to understand. They might think, what about buying a house?"

Wolmark also points out that all people need support when a partner is going to undergo a lot of medical procedures. Partners need time to recover, and complications can arise. Not everyone can afford to take time off work. This is one instance when having outside support is crucial.



Sue Bloomfield (right) and Angela Bey are in the process of moving from La Grande to Lake Oswego in order to find a more accepting atmosphere. They dated for two years before Angela transitioned from David (inset), pictured here in 1996.

Vanderburgh is working with several clients from small towns. Many are moving to Portland for a more accepting atmosphere. "People who live in small towns resent the fact that they have to move to the city," he says. Sue and Angela are one such couple moving to Portland, and they will both have to find new jobs.

Another stressor is the process itself. "Transition is a necessarily self-centered process," says Vanderburgh, who is trans. "It's like recovering from addiction. You have to put yourself first if you're going to do it right. And that's really challenging for the relationship."

All of the couples had some difficulty around this issue. Anni jokes that she dealt with Theresa's self-centeredness by throwing tantrums. "Intellectually, I would understand," she says, "but emotionally, I was like, yeah, your makeup looks fine!"

Another area of contention was how

Theresa chose to dress. "I would ask her, 'What's up with the makeup and the high heels? You're a radical, for Christ's sake!'"

Ani eventually came to understand that this is part of the transition. "Who knows if she'll wear makeup and high heels five years from now? But right now it's important," explains Ani. "These are the things she has come to identify as feminine."

Brenda says she initially had a lot to learn, including the difference between a cross-dresser and a trans person. It wasn't until she and Devan attended an FTM conference in 1996 that she realized the full implication of what was going on for him.

Brenda spent much of the conference crying. "This was something I needed to deal with that wasn't part of my plan," she says. "My process would be a byproduct of his process. That seemed so patriarchal again."

She knew Devan needed to transition to be happy. "It was a huge risk for me," she says of



getting involved with someone who needed to undergo such a transformation in order to be fulfilled.

According to Wolmark, significant others need support. "I can't emphasize that enough," she says. Yet she is first to admit that there are not a lot of resources for partners (see sidebar).

"I needed support really, really badly," Brenda notes. Although many people, including Sue, connect on the Internet or through organizations such as Northwest Gender Alliance, Brenda says most of her support came through recovery meetings, "but certainly not from anyone else who knew where I was coming from."

## Children and families

Coming out to children and families is another source of significant stress on a relationship.

"One thing that comes along with coming out is rejection. Not all families, friends and communities are thrilled," says Wolmark. "A lot of times people expect that their families are not going to take it very well, but they can end up surprising you and be a really important support. Most of the trans people I've worked with have not had a really horrible time with their families."

Children's reactions can vary, too. Theresa's daughter, now 15, was told when she was 10 and has been accepting. Her one concern was if she could still refer to Theresa as "Daddy." She attends an alternative high school that has trans youth, so she feels somewhat supported. "She's done really well with a really hard set of circumstances," Ani says.

Sue and Angela did not have it so easy. Angela lost many friends she had known for 25 years. Most of Sue's family, with the exception of her two adult sons, rejected her after the news. She says she was fairly estranged from them anyway. Although Angela's sister and parents took the news well, her two brothers, who belong to fundamentalist religions, did not. They refuse to let Angela see her nieces and nephews.

"Even though the losses were not my losses, they were still hard," Sue says. "It's been difficult because I watched my spouse go through a lot of pain."

According to Vanderburgh, children usually take the news well if they're told before hitting puberty. He says it gets a little trickier during adolescence because youth are searching for their own identities.

Wolmark suggests parents find an age-appropriate way to tell children. "I've worked with too many people who have had

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—Reid Vanderburgh



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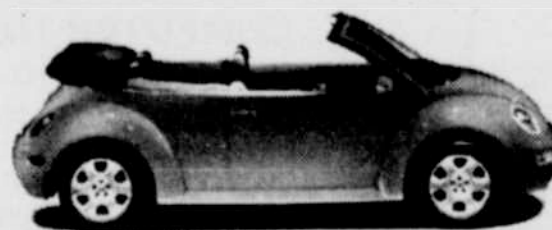


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