

Rachel's Reflection: Transgender staff member finds self-acceptance

By Nuria Martinez-Keel

Editor's Note: The names of Rachel Clary's children have been changed to respect their privacy.

Rachel Clary begins every weekday morning with a shower before preparing in front of a mirror. She shaves, puts on makeup and fixes her hair. Before facing the world each day, she first comes face-to-face with herself.

For many years, it was Robert's face looking back from that mirror.

But Rachel, 33, has been seeing more of herself since getting back on her transition medications in September and less of Robert, the troubled man some would prefer she still see.

She has noticed less muscle mass and body hair while watching her confidence grow, her old burdened weariness swapped for a positive outlook, much like the wardrobe of button-ups and slacks she traded for dresses and heels.

"Best way to explain it is I am getting rid of all the bad feelings I've had towards myself," Rachel said. "Not everyone's going to agree with it, but I'm not worried about that any longer. "I am very proud of who I am 'cause it hurts so much holding onto all of this, really."

Much has changed for Rachel, a human resource assistant at Oklahoma State University, since she committed to transitioning. Her identity, for one, is different, and she replaced substance abuse with testosterone blockers and estrogen.

She inched out of the closet in a monthslong process starting three years ago, telling only a few before sharing her secret slowly with the wider world.

Come January, her deepest secret was hardly a mystery any longer. Her newest chapter got a stamp of finality with a December email:

"As most know, I came out last year as transgender, and the past year has been a planning period," she wrote. "Effective January 3, I will return to work as Rachel and will use female pronouns."

The email went out across the OSU campus, alerting administrators who forwarded the message to their departments' faculty and staff.

The simple message swept away any ideas Rachel would waver in her transition like in the past. Employees in the HR office and beyond in Whitehurst were aware of their transgender coworker, but many were unsure of her position going forward.

Joy MacDonald, an OSU payroll services accountant and close friend of Rachel, said Rachel has been more medically proactive in continuing her transition, which encourages her to stay on the

right track.

“She has to, I think, for herself, for her life,” MacDonald said. “I think this time she’s just finally accepted, ‘This is who I am. This is who I have to be.’”

Now, there was no question Rachel was here to stay. She was openly the person once shoved in the closet and concealed with drugs, alcohol and pain.

It took 31 years for Rachel to finally emerge. But long before, she had to discover who she was meant to become.

'Convincing people'

Robert Clary was born in 1983 in Tulsa. He grew up in Stillwater in what Rachel described as a normal childhood, attending the local school system and participating in sports like many other boys.

Back then, Robert could often be found playing pickup games of roller hockey in neighborhood streets or at the old tennis courts by Boomer Lake.

He was laid back, cocky, eager to fit in and desperate for everyone to know he was the typical “guy.”

“I would do and say the crudest things just so that I could convince people,” Rachel said. “I did a really good job of it, convincing people.”

Robert also had an edge. He started smoking marijuana frequently in high school and was often willing to take risks of bodily injury. Playing roller hockey was not only a hobby but also a chance to feel physical pain.

The pain and drugs, which he later replaced with booze, served as a way to mask Robert’s inner feelings. He had been thinking of things for years he knew he “wasn’t supposed to want as a boy.”

Robert saw the way women dressed, acted and expressed emotion, and he identified more with feminine characteristics than those that suited his gender. By 14, he was able to put a name to those feelings after an internet search. Once he was about 20, he knew exactly what – and who – he was.

Robert was transgender, and he buried it.

“The whole mental aspect towards myself that I had growing up was terrible,” Rachel said. “If it caused any sort of self-harm, I would do it. I took risks that I shouldn’t have taken. I did all kinds of drugs. I drank. I did stupid things, really, trying to deal with this.”

In fear of anyone discovering his secret, he masked his inner desires. No one noticed his heightening anxiety when he passed by the women’s section of clothing stores. Nobody knew the

real reason he used drugs or drank so heavily.

Neither his first wife nor his second, and certainly none of his four children, knew Robert, deep down, was destined to be Rachel. The feelings, though, never went away, no matter what substance he used to numb them.

Coming out

By 31, Robert had been through two divorces and had four children. He and a serious girlfriend at the time were thinking about getting married, despite Robert's difficulty finding enough peace to settle down.

The drinking continued, though. He had overcome a two-year span in which he was on the bottle nearly every day, but his drinking afterward became sporadic, some days under control and other times not. The longing for womanhood was ever-present, bearing down on his shoulders and racing through his mind. Rachel was knocking on the closet door.

Robert grew distant, upsetting his girlfriend. She couldn't understand what weighed on him so terribly. By September 2014, he couldn't hide the truth anymore.

"I had to eventually tell her," Rachel said. "So I told her, 'I'm transgender,' and that pretty much ended the relationship right there."

Just like that, the words were out in the open, and a burden lifted off Robert's shoulders. Despite the pain of losing a future fiancée, his admission was a relief, a first step down the road to self-acceptance.

The journey, though, was far from over and certainly never easy.

He came out to his immediate family in the following weeks, a part of the story Rachel prefers to keep private. He talked with a counselor for months before coming out publicly. He built up to it, sharing the truth with more and more groups until it was general knowledge by June 2015, when Robert started going by Rachel.

But past challenges didn't disappear as new problems piled on.

Rachel's relationship with her family had completely changed. Lifelong friendships disappeared. Rachel's uniqueness was almost tangible in her traditional Oklahoma town. Old connections grew cold, and stares followed everywhere in public.

Senior clinical counselor Joseph Dunnigan, of OSU University Counseling Services, coordinates the Safe Zone training program on campus to educate faculty and staff on LGBT issues and resources. He said having little experience or education on these topics leads some people to reject a transgender person's identity.

"I think a lot of people, they may react negatively not always because they're awful people or

they're going to be discriminatory, but there's that lack of knowledge," Dunnigan said. "I think when we get something that just doesn't fit with our understanding of the world, it can be threatening, it can be scary, and that's where you see that pushback."

Realizing struggles

Rachel's most difficult challenge of all, though, was with her four children: Jessica, Ashley, Jacob and Carly.

Carly, 3, doesn't know her father is now Rachel. Her mother will decide when to tell her about the change. The same cannot be said for Rachel's three older children.

The news hit Jessica, then 10, the hardest when she found out in March 2015. She and her dad were inseparable, he being the one she wanted to run to even after her parents had split up and she moved to a different town with her mother. The revelation of her dad's gender identity hurt and confused her, Rachel said.

"I'm not going to lie to you," Rachel told Jessica. "It's wrong for me to sit here and tell you to be who you are if I can't do the same."

The truth created a harsh reality for Jessica, now 12, one she wanted to protect her younger sister Ashley from. She didn't want Ashley to experience the same pain and confusion she had. But Rachel told Ashley about her transition a few months later.

"I told (Jessica), 'I haven't lied to you. I'm not lying to her. There's no reason that needs to happen,'" Rachel said. "It really upset her. That was our last conversation."

They haven't spoken in almost two years.

Rachel's son, 6-year-old Jacob, has trouble understanding Rachel's transition, as well. Some days he's accepting but other times struggles to wrap his mind around a concept many adults don't fully grasp.

The two get to talk over the phone occasionally – opportunities in which Rachel prefers to focus the conversation on her son. Why talk about her transition when they could laugh together?

Contact between Rachel and her children is limited, as handling the truth has been as complicated for the oldest three as it was for their father for many years. Once they're old enough to make their own decisions, the chance for a closer relationship will be there, depending on what choice each one makes.

"It's something that they're going to have to deal with," Rachel said. "I feel bad for them because it is hard. I can only imagine how hard it is for them."

Losing contact with loved ones wore down on Rachel, and the challenges of living as a transgender woman dug in. The stares in public kept coming, and the opportunity for gender

transition surgeries was years away.

She became depressed and started cutting her arm. In search of an escape, Rachel attempted suicide.

“It was just one of those things that it just hit me one day,” she said. “After that, I knew I had to get out of here. Otherwise, I wasn’t going to live.”

Rachel was angry. She wanted to get out of Oklahoma, away from the judgmental looks and negativity. So in October 2015, she resigned from her job at OSU, where she had worked since 2012, and moved to the Bay Area of California.

Living there was a relief. No one stared at her when she walked down the street. Nobody cared, frankly, whether she was born a man or a woman. And it was good to put more than 1,500 miles between herself and Stillwater.

Life there wasn’t sustainable, though, as Rachel struggled to find a job. A month later, she decided to come back to Oklahoma and try something new.

Finding a path

“Maybe I really don’t need to transition,” she thought.

Rachel convinced herself life might be better pretending to be Robert again. She could present as a man at work and be a woman at home. It would be easier anyway for Robert to find a job than mid-transition Rachel.

While looking for work, she moved in with MacDonald for about three months. MacDonald hadn’t met Rachel until after she came out as transgender at OSU and never saw Rachel portray anything but her true self.

“Robert was always trying to suppress that, and it just made him a big jerk ’cause he’s miserable all the time,” MacDonald said. “When you’re miserable, then you get angry, and you just take it out on the people around you and yourself.”

Rachel wasn’t accustomed to being in the closet after living openly for almost a year. Hiding her gender identity was unbearable, and it cast a dark cloud over her life again.

She quit taking transition medication and in February 2016 started a job in Stillwater, showing up for work every day as Robert. Meanwhile, her spirit started to crumble.

Rachel experienced anger outbursts, anxiety and deepening depression. She felt physically sick at work from the fear of someone discovering her secret. Old self-destructive habits returned as she forced herself to stop sleeping until passing out in a cold sweat.

By June, her worsening condition came to a head. In a day and a half, she took 30-45 pills of

prescribed anxiety medication and lost all memory of the days before and after, despite functioning consciously at the time.

That's when MacDonald stepped in before the situation got any worse.

"You need to get back on track and you need to transition because you are not well," MacDonald said to her. "You are a terrible person whenever you're like this. You need to transition because we all like you better that way."

Rachel agreed and decided to make a change. A job opened up in July at the OSU Human Resources office, and Rachel jumped at the chance to work at the university again. She had already come out and presented as a woman there before, so she looked forward to being herself at work.

She started taking testosterone blockers again in September and has since made appointments with an endocrinologist to safely take additional hormone therapy medications. Rachel has created a plan for the future surgeries she would like to have to make a full transition.

Now, there's a clear path ahead. Despite ongoing difficulties, the future seems brighter and full of more possibilities for Rachel. She looks forward to finding a long-lasting relationship with a woman, as her sexual orientation did not change when she transitioned.

Most of all, she predicts more happy days in the open instead of dark ones spent in the closet. With every hormone pill and surgery, she can look forward to fulfilling more of who she is. She can wipe the fog off her mirror and see the right face peeking through. But the change in physical appearance is secondary to the development Rachel has felt on the inside.

"As I've progressed further along, my image of myself has gotten better," she said. "I feel that no matter how I look, I'm that person now."

news@ocolly.com