

## Building social connections for Trans and Gender Diverse Elders Gender expression, respect and family connections

### Part One: Evidence of need Narratives from Trans and Gender Diverse Elders

The following extracts from recent research called: Gender is just a part of who I am<sup>1</sup> – a collection of narratives from trans and gender diverse elders. These extracts highlight the need to build respectful social connections with families and others.

**Caren:** *I got married twice and had beautiful children. Neither of my partners knew that I had needs and leanings towards dressing and acting female.... Then I met another woman. We were very, very, very close [and] I ... told her exactly how I felt and that I needed to dress and that if she would accept that it would be wonderful, but if she couldn't, well, I couldn't hide it anymore. She thought for about a week and then she said, I accept you as you are. ... It was lovely for about three, four years, [and then she] said that if I wanted to continue to dress ... she didn't want to be involved. I felt like I'd been shot. All the shame came back. I moved out and lived in some pretty crummy places for a number of years hoping for a reconciliation. One of my sons has not spoken to me for two years. ... he bashed me up and kicked me and all kinds of things, he was quite angry. He'll come around one day. I've explained it as much and as often as I could that I didn't choose this. This is who I am, and that I would love it if he and the other children would accept it as a courageous strong thing to do. I would love it if they would accept that I'm demonstrating to them that it doesn't matter what you do as long as you seek your own happiness and do whatever it takes to find that (p.12).*

**Susan:** *When I transitioned a lot of my friends found it difficult to accept who I was. I divorced, and I was severely depressed, because I'd been married for over 30 years, I absolutely loved the woman, and when I wanted to change over, she said, "We'll ... talk about it". And we talked about it, and talked about it, and talked about it. And she saw a couple of programs on TV about trans people, specifically "Becoming Chaz" about Cher's daughter [who transitioned to male]. And she said, "I can totally understand how hard it must be for you to not be the person you want to be, you have my blessings, let's go ahead and do it". So, I went and got breast implants, and then I organised the surgery, and there was complications with the surgery, and she nursed me through that. She was fantastic. And I was falling deeper and deeper in love with my wife of over 30 years. And then finally some months later, when I was up and about and working again, I was getting ready for work one day, and she came into the room and said, "I want a divorce". And it absolutely blew me out of the water. You know, I thought we had a really good, strong relationship. She said to me, "I'm not a lesbian and you are not the man I married". I thought about it for 24 hours, and I said, Well, I understand where you're coming from, but it's not the person – it's not the body that makes the person, it's the person inside (p. 32).*

**Jeanine:** *I was married for 25 years. We had two girls and both those girls are grown up now. After I got married there was a bit of a gap, but I started to cross-dress again when I was alone. Then I did discuss it with my wife and she gave me permission to wear certain pyjamas and that sort of thing. In the 1990s I had a very dramatic upheaval in my life because I lost my father. It caused a major depression episode .. and I started to wear more female clothes. ... Then just a couple of years after that, my wife went to work and never returned. She divorced me. So I was left alone. My eldest daughter sided with her mother and my youngest daughter sided with me (p. 17).*

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<sup>1</sup> Latham, J & Barrett, C (2015) "Gender is just part of who I am": Stories from Trans Australians. Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia. Available from: <http://www.opalinstitute.org/uploads/1/5/3/9/15399992/transnarrativeresource.pdf>

**Beatrice:** *one of the big stressors over my time, ... that took me close to the self-harm area, was worrying about the effect I had on my wife and .. her friends [and the church we were part of]. I told them ... If anybody was going to leave the church because of me, ...I would leave. We left that church and that was a very big thing for my dear wife. The pain caused to my children, which is ongoing, has meant that I haven't been able to see some of my grandchildren, or one of them in particular at all. I think I've probably been luckier than so many by having a caring wife. We've been married for over 40 years, so it's a long-term relationship (p.10).*

**Philippa:** *I think one of the most difficult things for a lot of trannies is that they have been rejected by their kinfolk. I have two brothers. They don't accept me. Even though one of them invited me to come and stay with him. He's married, and his wife was really fascinated by me. She thought I was like the 'drag queen' Carlotta or something. She was very fascinated and would ask me really stupid questions, which in the end I found very, very insulting. Stupid bloody questions she was asking, like I was some sort of freak (p.28).*

**Alison:** *Another experience that many in the trans community have witnessed relates to attending the funeral of a trans person. I had only ever known this person as trans and they lived full time as trans and had transitioned some years earlier. The person's family did not accept their transition and the person was only referred to as their sex assigned at birth and their christened name and not their preferred gender or name. They had not been dressed in the clothes of their preferred gender. And for that person – a trans woman – then to be dressed as a male, referenced as a male, and for trans people to be ignored or disdained in terms of the funeral and at the reception afterwards, is about the most distressing thing that I've done in my life, and it's happened on multiple occasions. This was totally ignoring, hiding, denying the real life of this person and absolutely abhorrent for their true friends. The family did not want us there and we were shunned throughout. Unfortunately, this is not an isolated situation. I have been to other funerals with a similar story (p.9).*

**Laura:** *I negotiated [with the family of a] friend of mine .. they wanted her buried as a man but after talking to them they agreed that she could be buried as a woman because she'd been a woman since she was 18 and she died at 73. They agreed to it on the condition that I put a photograph of her on the headstone as a boy. And so the headstone didn't mention her male name but it had a photo of her as a boy but I put one on there also of her as a girl. And there's a lot of trans girls who die here and they don't have all the documentations like Wills and what have you in place and so their families – I mean these are girls that have been living with it for years. Their families et cetera are contacted and they do what they want, not what the deceased would have wanted (p. 23).*

**Edna** (told by an aged care service provider): *We [had a new resident admitted as male and] ...[when one of the staff went to] assist him and she noticed his anatomy was different. [We found out] he had transitioned in 1975 from male to female. [His] children were in their early teens at the time and they're having problems adjusting – still 40 years later. [So] the reason why this gentleman ...is living as a male here is because the son said, "If you embarrass us and you don't dress like a man, you won't see any grandchildren." So that's why he's living as a male here. Not that the son brings his children in much, but that threat was made.*

**Gene** (told by an aged care service provider): *[I was caring for] a person who's lived most of their life as a male. Inside the house he had an agreement with his wife that he was allowed to dress as female. ... but ... the agreement with her wife was that dressing as a woman doesn't go out the front door. ... [outside the front door] it seems like she was almost the alpha male (p. 44).*

**Samantha** (told by an aged care service provider): *Sam came into [our residential aged care facility] around about a year ago [and transitioned after her admission]. Sam [told] the lifestyle coordinator "I used to enjoy dressing as a female and was gay but my family wasn't happy with it". Sam has a nephew, he's her guardian, next of kin person. [He responded to her transition by saying: It's just behaviour. She's doing this for attention". ... You shouldn't encourage this. He's only doing it for attention." (p. 48)*