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Crossing the Gender Divide

An Interview with Tan Houghton and Jonathan Pare

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Tan Houghton and Jonathan Pare are both actively involved in the trans community. Jonathan was one of the co-founders of the Victorian group Transgender Liberation and Care and Tan is now the president of the group.

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How do you identify, what labels do you choose for yourself?

Tan: For me personally, I choose Tan. When people ask me how I identify, I say as Tan.

Johnathan: I'm very proud of being transgender, if someone was to come up to me on the street and say "are you transgender?" I would say yes, but I see myself as a guy, just like any other guy. Sexuality, which is a different thing completely, I would identify as bisexual. I identify myself as Jonathan, but in the real world that doesn't stick; people want a word they can relate to, so I'm a guy or, if a situation arises where I think it's appropriate, I'm transgender and specifically F.T.M.

What has your journey been like?

Tan: I grew up knowing I was different but not knowing what the difference was. As I got older I found myself attracted to women so I thought, if I'm a girl and I'm attracted to girls, then society says I must be a lesbian. So for six years I tried to fit into a lesbian persona and found it very hard. Through six years of meeting different people, coming across other people who didn't identify strictly as a girl or a guy and being exposed to different ways of life, things came out clearer.

I started delving into my childhood stuff. I had a hatred of men but I couldn't work out why. I didn't want to face the guy that I was because I wanted to be just like everyone else. I was brought up in a strict Italian household, I had the expectations of an Italian girl, you go to school, you get married, you have your kids, you settle down with your husband. I thought, well, I want to do that because otherwise it's going to be too hard. So I struggled with that for a long time.

I went through the saga of drinking full-on as a teenager, trying to stop all the thoughts and feelings of being different and not wanting to at that stage find out what was different about me, I just wanted to fit in. As I got older I got into the drugs, to suppress everything and try to feel normal and go along with what was expected. I think a lot of us go through that, you just try to suppress it, not deal with it. I'd come to a point in my life where I thought, I've got to be honest with myself and I've got to not hide, so then once everything came up for me and I realised yeah, I'm a transsexual, I stopped hiding and I was honest with everyone, sat down, told family, told friends, and then sat back and thought, okay, people who are going to stay are going to stay, people who are going to go, well, just go.

I couldn't continue the way I was. It was either live as the real me, Tan the guy, or not at all, because I just couldn't do it anymore.

It was too hard, it wasn't me. And it was destroying me. And it was destroying the relationships I was having, not only sexual relationships with partners but relationships with friends and especially the relationship with my family.

I got to the point where I hated myself, but that was a good point for me to get to because then I could start rebuilding and that's what I've been doing ever since. My family accepts me now and they actually praise me for certain qualities of my personality that prior, living as a girl, I was condemned for.

Jonathan: For me, I knew from the day that I was born. I'm originally from Tasmania, and back then everything was so black or white. You were a man or you were a woman. I was a guy, I'd always known that I was a guy. From my younger years I'd always believed that I was going to change at some stage naturally. I got to about ten or eleven when my breasts started to develop and realised that that wasn't going to happen. I saw a show where there was a panel of transsexuals that were being interviewed and I just went "that's what I have to do, I've got to go to the medical profession and they'll do it for me".

So I got to fifteen and through the advice of my step-mother I started seeing a counsellor, who advised me to tell my parents, which I

did. In hindsight I shouldn't have told them so young because I was still living at home and that caused a lot of problems between my family and myself. As a girl you're really radical and out there, because you don't fit into the lipstick mode, and that was okay until I got to about twelve or thirteen and then all of a sudden I was condemned for something that I'd always done that was okay and I had no idea what was going on. From that point onwards, I basically came-out to my family. They completely turned against me. I wasn't kicked out of home, nothing overly serious like that, but from an emotional point of view, it turned my world upside down. I've found that I'm still trying to come to terms with that.

I was out, I started my H.S.C. and everyone knew. I coped with that. That was in an extremely difficult time and I had a really good support network as far as friends that surrounded me and protected me basically. When I was nineteen I moved here, basically to start a new life, but it was getting quite violent for me down there. I had just started taking hormones and just knew that the young guys were waiting for me to get to a point where they could beat the crap out of me if not kill me. It was a good time to leave.

I moved to Melbourne. I was working in the straight world, playing the straight game. I was just a guy like any other guy. I had girlfriends, straight girls didn't have a problem with relationships, I did, but at the time I didn't think that I did. But I was completely isolated and silenced because no one knew except for my partner and we never talked about it you just work around these things, you simulate your life to be as normal as possible.

I got to the stage when I was about twenty-five, I went back to school. I learnt so much about myself but also the reality of this world and this life that that yet again turned my life upside down and I started to seriously question my upbringing, the values, and everything that had been pumped into me via society and everything that I saw around me. I started having huge issues with my sexuality that I hadn't had before. That was very difficult for me because I think I was still locked into the 'gender and sexuality is one and the same', and I learned to separate that out and to realise that I was a guy, that I was a different guy, I was a guy with a vagina basically, and what did that mean when it came to my sexuality and having relationships with men potentially.

One of the first things I was told when I started was that "this is going to be a very difficult life for you, you would have to prove constantly to everyone that you are what you say you are". Most of my experiences haven't been people knowing and it's been in my face, it's been what I've seen and heard around me. A good example is this: I did a lot of voluntary work at the AIDS Council and plastered all around the walls were naked men, naked men, naked men, naked men. That to me, well, it doesn't reinforce my body, it doesn't reinforce the acceptance that I'm trying to create with my body, and that's something that's an ongoing thing. There's no validation anywhere. You really don't exist. There's nothing, there's no role models. I think that is the ongoing frustration. If your self-esteem is okay, you can ride through that stuff, but no one's self-esteem is okay all the time. So you end up going up and down like a yoyo and there's nothing around you that will support you except for friends and really only people like you can support you in the way that you need.

I've had some difficult experiences with friends throughout my life, people that I've worked with two years, three years, and it's got to the point where we're really good mates, I want them to know this because we've got something between us and we're such good friends that it obviously won't make that much of a difference if I tell them. And believe you me, you can't predict how someone's going to react. And I've had people turn around and go, "what, you're really a woman?".

Tan: I've had them start referring to you as she, when they've been calling you he.

Do you feel like you're accepted by the gay, lesbian and bisexual community?

Tan: Not overly. If you identify just from a guy's point of view as a gay man, you can't go into the gay scene. You're not accepted. You're accepted purely from the physical level like you can walk in and they go, "oh, you're a good-looking guy" but once they know, it's like, "you're not a guy, you haven't got a dick".

Jonathan: For most of my life I've lived in the heterosexual world. When I started doing a lot of volunteer work at the AIDS Council and a variety of organisations that were more gay and lesbian focused, I was under this idealistic grand assumption that I would be very welcome because whilst gays and lesbians experiences are very different, the discrimination and the ridicule from being different is on a par. I thought, they've had these experiences, they're going to open their arms to someone like me who's had a different experience but a similar experience of rejection. And I have never been so discriminated against, more so by the gay and lesbian community than the heterosexual world. Because it always comes back down to sex. Have you got a dick? You don't fit in. To generalise. There are a lot of wonderful straight, gay and lesbian people out there, but en masse, if I was a single person and I wanted to pick up, there's so much involved that you just don't do it. You can't. You meet people through social situations. Like Tan said, you're constantly searching for crowds who are extremely open-minded, who really have analysed the world and see it for what it is and they're really the only people we can really connect with because they're kind of on par with our head space.

Tan: We face discrimination within the so-called transgender community. And also the values between the girls and us guys. I've heard so many comments like "ew, look at you, why would you want to be so hairy?". I know that that's their projection, so intellectually I can go, "no that's your stuff you're projecting your own self-hate of the man that you were". Sometimes I feel like I'm just bashing my head against a wall, trying to let people know who are also transgendered that my experiences are very valid. I've been told I don't have the right equipment. This is from someone who supposedly also doesn't have the right equipment, whatever that means. So I certainly don't feel that there's any such community that I feel safe and comfortable or belong to other than the little community that I've made myself which includes the friends that I surround myself with; the family.

Jonathan: I think the main problem we all face is that society has created a system which is extremely black and white. The reality for us and a lot of people like us, regardless of their situation, they don't have to be transgender at all is that we actually live in a world where there are millions of shades of grey and they're not taken into consideration at all and they're not accepted at all.

When a transgender person first presents to the medical profession, the attitude given to you is that it's a two year process, we see you

on a regular basis, you start your hormones, you have your surgery and then it is all over and done with and you get on with the rest of your life. My experience certainly hasn't been like that. Once you admit to yourself that you are transgender, and once you make a move forward and enter that way of existing, it is the rest of your life. We can't change our birth certificates, male passports, we can't marry, we can't sit on juries, we're still classified as deviants in a big way.

Tan: So even if we wanted to do what was expected of us, get on with life, you can't. And there's no legal grounds we're not covered by any legislation. We can get evicted from our houses, we can lose our jobs, just for being trannies.

Jonathan: A lot of places you can't even get health insurance, it's the same argument with gays and lesbians: you made the choice. My attitude has always been, I'm the same person as the day that I was born. There was no choice involved, it was just something that I had to do. The big thing is lack of awareness within the broader community.

Tan: And people go, "well why don't you go out there and educate everyone?". It's draining, and it's hard and you feel really vulnerable and some people are really open and will take on board what we tell them and are accepting but then there are others who aren't.

Jonathan: We've both done presentations but my experience is as soon as you announce what you are, people don't hear another word because they just spend the whole time going "oh my god", or trying to see. You'll finish the presentation and you'll be in an open area where people usually chat to presenters and no one will come anywhere near you and they'll just walk around staring at you. And you think, I'm just a normal person! Come have a beer with me!

Tan: The last time I did one, my mother was there and after it finished, she went around to everyone, introduced herself as my mother and I was her son. And shook hands with everyone. She was great.

Jonathan: That sort of stuff's great, because it breaks the ice with people. For someone else to be accepting of the situation, it's like, well if you're his mother and you're cool about it, then I should be cool about it too.

Would you like to be more accepted by the gay, lesbian and bisexual community?

Jonathan: The bottom line being we're all queer. I guess the basis for everything is we're all people. There are some good people, there are some bad people. I'm sure we've got a lot in common with individuals in all of the communities, but like we were saying before, we've met a lot of guys and we don't get along with all of those guys and it'd be the same for lesbians with lesbians, gay men with gay men, bisexuals as well. I think bisexuals and us probably have far more in common than gays and lesbians.

I was in a relationship a few years ago. She was a bisexual woman and actively involved in the gay and lesbian community to different degrees and we used to go out occasionally and then we ended up not going out together at all because she wanted to respect gay and lesbian space by not being together. My attitude, pardon my French, was "fuck their space! I don't have any, I can create it wherever I want to go".

Tan: Yeah, we often sit back and go "I feel like going out But where?". And then we sit and rack our brains and go. "where is there around Melbourne where we can feel comfortable?" And we never go out, because we can't come up with something. You get treated a certain way, depending on what's been around in the media, depending on what's happening in the gay and lesbian scene. Like at the moment, the drag kings are all the flavour and it's embraced, isn't that wonderful, but I don't understand that because we're not accepted.

Jonathan: There are so many people out there that in their own minds make sense of their lifestyle and their lives but they think very differently to how people perceive or make assumptions about them. That's the hardest part, people make assumptions about you and they're often so wrong. But no one ever questions you or asks you a single question, they just assume.

I'd like to feel more part of the gay and lesbian community if bisexual people were included in that as well. I think where all of these so-called minority discriminated communities should be heading is accepting diversity, accepting people on an individual basis and a lot of the rules that were created from decades and centuries and Christian eras ago, it's about bloody time we all joined forces and went stuff you. Because if we all join forces, there are so many more of us than the conservative little number, we could get so much done.

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