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Life as a Transgender Woman in Sydney

by Kate Doak

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A few months ago, a shiver went down my spine. It was a feeling that, as a young transgender woman, I never thought I'd experience again.

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It was late last year. I could hear televisions, microwaves and furniture being smashed with sledgehammers and then thrown out a third floor window onto the cold, hard concrete below. Volunteers from a Salvation Army homeless refuge were cleaning out the units behind my home in Sydney's inner west and some of the most offensive words I've ever heard came pouring out of their mouths.

"Go and pop another hormone" screamed one burly young man. Another yelled "We've got a freak here with tits and a dick" as I tried to find out what was going

on. Yet the scariest remark came from the ringleader - "I'm going to come back and burn this place to the ground with all of you tranny whores in it" - as I tried to call the police.

Now, that sort of experience is not indicative of what Sydney is like for transgender people generally. But the language and abuse dealt by the Salvos volunteers can give even a resilient person, like myself, a terrorising anxiety attack.

Needless to say, it's that sort of treatment that made me move to Sydney from rural New South Wales in the first place, just over two years ago.

Some people love nothing more than to imply that being a transgender woman and a lesbian is simply a lifestyle choice. But I can say with certainty that the only choice I've ever had occurred on the 3rd of March in 2013 in the small town of Inverell when some very close friends persuaded me not to take my own life.

Huddled tightly in a small ball and sobbing continuously for hours on end, I felt as if I was on a never-ending downward spiral. The thoughts, frustrations, sadness, anxiety, regrets and despair that I'd hidden away from myself for over 28 years came bubbling to the surface. I now realise I'd been brooding for months in a manner that was dangerous for both myself and everyone around me.

However, while I ultimately escaped from that waking nightmare with a greater appreciation of my own humanity and mortality, a lot of people do not. And, with studies such as *From Blues To Rainbows* from La Trobe University showing that more than 84 per cent of young transpeople have contemplated suicide, I can't help but view each and every day as a gift.

While the internet may have made it easier for transgender youth like me to explore who we are and what we may become, I've found it can never be a substitute for case managers, educators and medical professionals who know how to offer the support, structure and time needed to heal. It's world class organisations such as the Gender Centre, Twenty10 and Safe Schools Coalition Australia that will ultimately save lives, just as some very compassionate people helped save mine.

While Sydney may have its rough edges just like every other community, it's ultimately the best city I could ever wish to live in while completing my transition from living as a man to a woman. Whether it be the abundance of potential opportunities for me to work as a freelance journalist, the warmest of warm hugs I received during the Mardi Gras parade earlier this year or the fact that I'm finally able to be me in ways I'd once only dreamed of, it's evident that over the past two years Sydney has become my safe haven and my home.

In a recent statement, a Salvation Army spokesperson said the volunteers from their homeless service were "not officers or staff" and "their comments in no way represent the position or views of the Salvation Army". They also made a commitment to provide training to staff and volunteers around transgender and intersex issues. If they follow through on that promise, I will not hold the incident against them.

As a close friend of mine once said to me, "The world is full of unhappy people, so why hate someone for being happy?"

It's compassion like that which is not only vital to true understanding and acceptance but is also indicative of the caring nature at our great city's heart.

If you, or someone you know, needs help please contact Lifeline on 13 11 14 for 24 hour support, 7 days a week.

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The Gender Centre is committed to developing and providing services and activities, which enhance the ability of people with gender issues to make informed choices. We offer a wide range of services to people with gender issues, their partners, family members and friends in New South Wales. We are an accommodation service and also act as an education, support, training and referral resource centre to other organisations and service providers. The Gender Centre is committed to educating the public and service providers about the needs of people with gender issues. We specifically aim to provide a high quality service, which acknowledges human rights and ensures respect and confidentiality.