

Valerie Wagstaff

Tells Her Story

by Valerie Wagstaff

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On 20 November, the Transgender Day of Remembrance, when those of our community who have lost their lives during the year are remembered and honoured, an observance was held by the transgender community and allies at the Newtown Neighbourhood Centre. There were a number of speakers and the event has been written up elsewhere in this issue. The keynote speech, by Sergeant Valerie Wagstaff of the N.S.W. Police was, however, so inspiring that we asked her to allow us to reproduce it in this issue of *Polare*. It is not only inspiring, it is also good-humoured, even funny, despite having a deep undercurrent of emotional maturity that can only help those of us in need of the knowledge that there is always a way forward and a hope for reformation of our human rights and an acceptance of us within the larger framework of society. Valerie is a genuine trail-blazer and we are honoured to have her words on these pages. Now read on:



Valerie with her father on the day Valerie graduated from the Police Academy

Tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou katoa. Kia ora - hello to you all. Thank you for inviting me here today. It is a great honour and privilege to be asked by the transgender community and the N.S.W. Police Force to say a few words on this special day that commemorates our brothers and sisters, who have died as a result of transgender hatred or prejudice.

I am acutely aware that it is their hard work and blood, sweat, and tears that has enabled me to walk my path

I was born in 1965, to wonderful parents, Hugh (of Welsh descent) and Becky Wagstaff (of Māori descent). I was the third son, with my brothers, Gary and Michael, preceding me, and my younger brother, Trev, arriving five years later.

I guess my childhood was quite typical of a transgender child, I loved to help mum with all the chores around the house and would often mimic her when she was in the kitchen or carrying out her domestic duties. Of course, I only have fragmented memories of my early years, but I do have a distinct recollection of preferring traditional 'girly' activities and disliking any 'boyish' activities.

This didn't go down well in New Zealand in the 60's and 70's, a country obsessed with Rugby Union and steeped in patriarchal traditions.

My inclinations led to some problems when, at five, I headed off to school. As you can imagine, any pretty sissy boy with a girly voice who rocks up to school in South Auckland and wants to play skipping games and hang out with the girls, went somewhat against the grain, and in some instances led to bullying and being ostracised.

Institutional gender conventions eventually kicked in, and by the time I reached the age of seven or eight, I found myself in a position where I was forced to make the inevitable choice between playing either rugby or soccer. I took the only preferred option available to me and hid in a closet during sports period! That option didn't last long, when one of my teachers, Mrs Howlett, found me hiding in the cupboard and sprung me. She was sympathetic to my plight, but I eventually had to make the inevitable choice, so I chose soccer, as it involved chasing boys around the field with consent!

I was pretty hopeless at sport. I actually remember once after running really hard in a race and coming second last! That was quite an achievement in my book. It didn't matter that the boy who came last, Martin, had an injured leg on the day. I didn't come last, and that made it memorable. I also remember having a 'best friend' Lucy, who was a bit of a gun on the athletics track, winning lots of ribbons and prizes for coming first. We tried to negotiate with her mother to give me one of her winning ribbons so I could go home with a prize to make mum and dad think I was cool. Unfortunately, Lucy's mum wouldn't have a bar of it, but it was worth a crack.

There were many times in my childhood that people thought I was a girl, even into my early teens. Although this would often lead to embarrassment on my part, as it was usually in front of my relatives and friends, inside I secretly relished such mistakes as they validated my belief that I should have been a girl and not a boy.

The years rolled on, and I became quite the illusionist, hiding my gender confusion from the world, emanating happiness and vitality on the outside and hiding the pain that burnt away inside. Anyway, in 1988, I moved to Sydney, Australia, and a few years later I secured a job with State Transit as a bus driver.

In 1992, I finally plucked up the courage, and commenced my transgender journey, starting with a transgender friendly G.P. in Petersham, who, in turn, led me to the Gender Centre, a refuge that was in my opinion, a Godsend, as I could meet other people that shared similar issues and experiences.

Eventually I came to the point where I had to pick my new girl-name. After searching through a name book, I settled on the name of Valerie, a name derived from the French word, 'Valor', meaning bold and brave, which I thought was quite appropriate, given the undertaking before me.

I remember the first time I walked into work at the Randwick Bus Depot. I was extremely nervous, but equally excited and relieved as I was finally going to be the person who I really wanted to be. I was dressed to the max, full on make-up, bouffant hairstyle, short skirt, tight fitting blouse. I must have looked like a real tart.

As a bus driver I was sometimes confronted by challenging moments. You can imagine how the school runs went. By and large, I got by, but one day one of the kids sprung me, and that was it ... the word spread ... and it was not unusual from that point on for me to turn up to a school with all the college kids chanting, "It's she- man".

On another occasion, I recall a man confronting me when I was driving the bus and calling me an abomination. After he left, a female passenger on the same bus came and gave me a bunch of flowers saying, "you're beautiful, you can have these". That was an emotional rollercoaster of a day, I can tell you.

I understand what it means to be subjected to such hatred, and sometimes it is overwhelming but remember this ... for every person who is hateful to you, there are many, many more who will give you the support, respect and love that you deserve.

For a while I worked as a courier for a motor cycle company, where the boss's son would harass me on a daily basis in relation to being transgender, after a customer (who happened to be a bus driver I had worked with) told him about me.

Every day I would make my deliveries and pickups, and he would be standing there in front of everyone, calling me "Victor/Victoria", and making me feel less than human with his cruel torments and put-downs. What was I to do? He was the boss's son. I could lose my job if I lashed out. I wouldn't be able to support myself or pay the rent. But one day, as is often the case, I finally cracked. I couldn't take the harassment and humiliation any more. I said, "You're nothing but a coward. I'm not afraid of you. I'm more of man than you'll ever be" and pushed him aside and said, "I don't know about you luv, but I've got bloody work to do". Do you know that all the guys in that workplace came up to me later and congratulated me for standing up for myself. I thought I would lose my job for sure, but that bully never hassled me again, and I stayed in that job until something better came along.

About 1996, I was seriously considering a career in the N.S.W. Police. I was a little apprehensive about pursuing this career choice but, despite my fears, I decided to throw caution to the wind and give it a shot. Of course, I had to disclose my past to the relevant authorities in the N.S.W. Police but, thankfully, this wasn't a big deal and I was accepted into the N.S.W. Police Academy where I took part in the rigorous training program. Despite not participating in academic study for fifteen years, I managed to complete the program, was attested in March 1999 and started shortly after at Newtown Police Station.

Of course there have been a number of times during my service that I have found myself in awkward and challenging situations with regard to my transgender status.

I was going to gloss over the next incident, although I think it's healthy to share some of the 'not-so-good moments' as we can all learn from them, and I guess it's important for people to know that I too, even as a transgender police officer, can still be subjected to intimidation and bullying, just because I am who I am. And it's not something I should feel awkward or ashamed to talk about. It's just what happens out there in the real world for transgender people.

An incident occurred when I was training at the Police Academy. I was very studious, but on one occasion I decided to join my fellow cadets for a drink at the local watering-hole, just opposite the Police Academy. While there, I was confronted by an off-duty police officer with a couple of his mates standing behind him. He turned to me and gripped my wrist tightly, and said to me, "I know what you are, you're a dirty fuckin' tranny".

I remember being shocked and having this moment of panic, thinking I could knock this guy's block off, or I could just walk away. Luckily, I brushed him off saying words to the effect of, "I don't need this shit", and walked past him.

I tell you, I was afraid that I would be in trouble if I retaliated. I was just a student police officer, not yet graduated, and he was a fully fledged Constable with a few of his mates (I should say they all looked very uncomfortable, and they looked confused about why he was confronting this attractive woman and calling her a tranny). I found myself with the unfortunate dilemma of "Do I report this matter to the police at the Academy, reveal to a police officer what had happened to me and reveal that I am transgender; or do I just sit in silence and hope the whole thing will just go away?".

I did report the matter to the Sergeant on duty at the Police Academy Security Office; and he was the most wonderful person. If I could remember his bloody name, I would shout it out loud here today, to thank him for treating me with so much dignity and respect. And you know what happened? Just after I finished giving my statement, the perpetrator came in, and the Sergeant went to confront him about the incident, and the guy gave him a bit of lip, so he arrested him and took him to the ground. I was shocked, but pleasantly surprised. So thank you for that, Sergeant. I don't know what happened after that, but all I know was that the Sergeant stuck up for me. Me, the tranny! How cool was that ... and that was back in 1998!

With all that said, I am very grateful to the N.S.W. Police Force for the support they have given me over the years. They have never flinched away from the challenges that my situation presented. In fact, it has been the opposite. In my opinion, it is an institution that has demonstrated maturity in promoting and embracing diversity and equal rights and opportunities within its work force.

The value the Force places on the contribution that people from diverse backgrounds can offer shows progressive leadership and the N.S.W. Police Force's commitment to respecting, valuing and embracing diversity.

By promoting a positive and supportive environment and embracing and appreciating transgender culture, I am optimistic that such an approach will serve as a beacon to other institutions, and I firmly believe that such an approach will continue to benefit not only the transgender community but the general community as a whole.

The Transgender Day of Remembrance means a lot to me, as I'm sure it does to many of us here today. It is also a day of respect and reflection where we acknowledge and pay homage to those people whose pioneering and courageous spirit contributed to the betterment of transgender people. Working tirelessly and without complaint, they have paved the way to the rights and freedoms that many of our transgender brothers and sisters enjoy today.

I want to take this opportunity to thank those people who still fight the fight today, to reach the heights of equality with our gender counterparts: people such as norrie mAy welby, on the Gender Centre Board for several years and a trail-blazer in obtaining recognition for those of non-specified gender.

Then there are my esteemed N.S.W. Police Force colleagues, Supt. Donna Adney, Supt. Anthony Crandell, Supt. Karen Webb, Commissioner Andrew Scipione, and the fabulous and amazing Senior Programs Officer for Gender and Sexuality, Jackie Braw, and so many others, who recognise the importance of supporting and protecting the rights of vulnerable communities, including members of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex communities.

I would like to acknowledge Katherine Cummings, and Phinn Borg, and the wonderful team at the Gender Centre, who continue to be a beacon of light to transgender people, far and wide.

I would like to take the opportunity to acknowledge and express my gratitude to those who are now in semi- or full retirement including: Roberta Perkins, who was the prime mover in setting up the Gender Centre in 1983, with the financial help of the then Minister for Youth and Community Affairs, the late Honourable Frank Walker, and Elizabeth Riley, who went from being a client of the Gender Centre to being its Manager, and who restructured the Centre by broadening the variety of services made available to the clientele.

And of course I would like to express my sincere gratitude to those who have passed on, including; Kathy Noble, a Queenslander (ex-Pom) who worked tirelessly for the transgender community and died earlier this year aged eighty-one but still going strong for the general good; Paula Hartigan, a dear friend and golf buddy; and one of the earliest workers for the Gender Centre, who looked after Outreach for many years and whose experience and unfailing good humour have been lost by her death, also early this year; Leslie Findlay, a Board Member for the Gender Centre for many years, who died in 2014.

I can't finish without mentioning such fabulous entertainers and colourful personalities in our community as the gorgeous and sharp witted, Carlotta (Queen of the Cross), a legend of Lés Girls and the inspiration for the movie *Priscilla Queen of the Desert*, who still dazzles and sparkles her way through life. And of course, my other mum, who is now shining up there in the heavens, Carmen Rupe, an amazing artist who was larger than life, and a stunning entertainer who could sashay into anyone's heart and make you feel special and loved.

I think of all our brothers and sisters and non-transgender colleagues, and acknowledge the work and contribution and great sacrifice that they have made in order for people like me to be able to work in mainstream conservative organisations, such as the N.S.W. Police Force.

I am acutely aware that it is their hard work and blood, sweat, and tears that has enabled me to walk my path. It is their collective tireless efforts, courage and endurance that have enabled us here today, to enjoy the liberty and the fruits of their hard labour and great sacrifice. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

As is customary in my culture, I would like to end with a simple song. It is called *Yellow Bird* and it reminds me of two things in my life, the time when I would look at my mum with great admiration for both her physical and her innate beauty and it reminds me, too, of my transgender sisters and brothers, who, however beautiful they are, sometimes find that their beauty, independence and individuality are not recognised. This is for you.

Yellow Bird

Yellow Bird, high up in a banana tree.

Yellow Bird, you sit all alone like me.

Did your lady friend, Leave the nest again

That is very sad. Makes me feels so bad.

You can fly away. In the sky away.

You're more lucky than me.

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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.