



“Call me Taylor”

A new, more accepting day is gradually dawning for transgender people, who are using the opportunity to move from the shadows and live more openly and confidently. Taylor Straw, who just happens to be an SCI BC Peer, is among them.

In June 2015, *Vanity Fair* magazine published one of its all-time most popular issues. The cover featured Caitlyn Jenner in a one-piece bodysuit with the title, “Call me Caitlyn,” tempting readers to open up the magazine and learn why Jenner would trade her life as a former male Olympian decathlete to live as a woman.

Well before this iconic issue of *Vanity Fair* appeared, the transgender movement had been gradually gaining momentum. But in retrospect, Jenner’s bare-all (or almost all, anyhow) story might have been the turning point for transgendered people’s quest to exercise their rights, battle discrimination, and

move from a covert existence into society’s mainstream. In the 18 months that followed, Jenner’s *Vanity Fair* feature prompted a flood of transgender stories and coverage elsewhere in the media. At the same time, efforts were stepped up to enshrine transgender rights alongside those of other formerly discriminated-against groups such as gay and lesbian people. Here in Canada, most notable among these was the Trudeau government’s introduction earlier this year of Bill C-16—legislation that would guarantee legal and human rights protection to transgender people across Canada (at the time of writing, the Bill was expected to be passed in a third reading in the

House of Commons and sent to the Senate before Christmas).

Of course, universal acceptance of transgender people won’t happen overnight. In many parts of the world (including, sadly, here in North America), they are subject to appalling discrimination and even violence. But it seems as though those fighting for transgender rights now have at least a foothold—and it’s unlikely that even a closed-minded US president-elect could change that.

In this environment of growing acceptance, more and more transgender people are stepping out of the closet, choosing to accept themselves and asking others to do the same. There are few reliable statistics to back this up, but plenty of anecdotal evidence. For example, in a *CBC News* story in October, Kris Wells, an assistant professor with the Institute for Sexual Minority Studies at the University of Alberta, explained

how “more resources, better education and a more welcoming culture are allowing transgender people to come out at younger ages.”

“It’s a definite trend that we’re seeing,” Wells told CBC. “There are more and more positive role models, challenging old stereotypes of being sick or diseased or being treated as a freak or a monster. Thankfully, that discourse is changing.”

One of those leveraging the opportunity to step out of the shadows is Taylor Straw, a 42-year-old SCI BC peer who lives on the Sunshine Coast. Clearly, Straw is not the first transgender person to live with an SCI. But she is definitely among the first to be so forthcoming about her journey and decision to move forward with a full male to female transition.

Straw, who was given the birthname Brandon but went by the nickname Buz from the age of five, grew up in the Lower Mainland. She knew at an early age that there was a disconnect between her biological gender and who she felt like inside. “When I was five, my sister, who is five years older than me, dressed me up in her clothes and did my hair and makeup,” she explains. “At that moment, a light bulb went on. At that time, being transgender didn’t have anywhere near the awareness that it does today, but the feeling I had when I dressed in her clothes was so comfortable and more right than anything I had felt before.”

So began Straw’s secret life—living her childhood and teen years outwardly as a male, but inside wrestling with gender and knowing she was somehow incomplete. It was a textbook case of gender dysphoria—the powerful feeling that one’s emotional and psychological identity as male or female is opposite to one’s biological sex. (Gender dysphoria used to be called gender identity disorder, but the name was changed to reflect that the medical profession, and society in general, no longer sees it as a “disorder”, in much the same way that being gay is no longer thought of as being a disorder.)

“Mentally and emotionally, I was drawn to social girl circles, but because of my masculine appearance, I hung around

with the guys,” she says. “There are so many reasons that it was difficult to come to terms with my true self. For example, in high school, a very flamboyant fellow student was picked on, made fun of and eventually beaten up in front of the whole school for apparently being gay. At this time, if you were openly gay or trans you would be categorized as a freak. What I know now as my gender identity and being transgender was not even something I was aware of at this time, as it wasn’t out in the social context. In my youth, there was absolutely no way I was going to reveal my gender identity to anyone, let alone those closest to me.”

Straw kept up the facade into early adulthood. That included working in the male-dominated profession of construction. Then, at the age of 24, she was injured while doing demolition on the second floor of the Woodward’s building in downtown Vancouver. She was operating a skid steer loader when she came too close to the building’s edge. The machine tipped her out the side to the parking lot below. The result was incomplete C4/C5 quadriplegia.

During the gruelling six months of rehab that followed, and into the first few years of post-injury life, Straw’s gender dysphoria took a back seat to simply trying to adjust to her new reality. And then, four years after her accident, love came knocking at the door.

Perhaps the biggest myth about being transgender is that sexuality and gender are one and the same. In reality, they

are completely separate facets of human existence. In 2004, Straw married her girlfriend of two years. The couple moved to the Sunshine Coast, where they’ve been ever since. They wanted a family, and eventually had three beautiful children, conceived the old-fashioned way with assistance from Vancouver’s Sexual Health Rehab Service.

Family life and being a parent came naturally to Straw. But she continued to wrestle with the gender issue. One of the by-products of gender dysphoria can be distress, anxiety, and depression. And for most, relief only arrives through acceptance.

“Every few years,” says Straw, “there were some significant moments that signalled to me that transitioning was the direction in which my life needed to go.”

Gradually, Straw became aware that the world was slowly changing. She’d seen some documentaries about trans people, and then, in 2015, Jenner’s revelation gave her the push she needed.

“Once Caitlyn Jenner came out about being trans and her transition, that was a major springboard for me, as I could see how the public was becoming more aware and accepting,” says Straw. “As a result, I felt more confident about sharing my identity with those closest to me. In the summer of 2015, my wife and I had a conversation in which I revealed that changing my gender was something I had to do.”

That revelation didn’t come as a complete surprise to her wife, as the couple



had discussed Straw being transgender many times previously. Nevertheless, Straw was relieved at her wife's reaction.

"When I came out to my wife, I knew it wasn't going to come as a huge shock to her, but I was surprised about just how supportive and encouraging she was. As much as I am sensitive to the feelings of those closest to me, I knew that I had to tell them about my transition in order for me to be functional and happy. Everyone I have told—my wife, kids, sister, parents and friends—are all supportive and happy for me."

And that, says Straw, all added up to a life-changing catharsis.

"It was the world's biggest weight being pulled off of me. I felt so free and happy. Months after I came out, my wife told me what a 'grumpy fu*%#r' I used to be. Now she sees how happy I am and how much more I'm enjoying life."

Not all transgender people transition. And there are degrees of transitioning for those who do. Some undergo hormone therapy to develop breasts and a feminine appearance. Others choose to move forward with a full transition, which includes sex reassignment surgery and other medical procedures.

For Straw, there was no doubt in her mind about her path forward.

"It was pretty much instant," she says. "Once I knew I was going to transition, I knew I wanted to fully transition. As a child I wanted to physically look like a girl; to have the body of a girl. Once I was older and learned that surgery was something I could do to make that happen, I was certain that top and bottom surgery was something I would work towards."

She describes herself today as being in the early stages of transitioning.

"I'm currently doing laser hair removal on my face. I'm taking hormones that are noticeably changing my body. I am in the process of legally changing my name and gender marker. I'm working with a GP who specializes in gender issues and we are working closely together to keep moving forward. Being older than others who transition means that the hormones I am on don't work as fast. It's a waiting

game to see what impact they have on my body. Before doing top surgery you have to be on hormones for at least two years. Needless to say, it's a long process to get to where I really need to be."

She concedes that SCI presents a challenge in the transitioning process.

"The decision to transition was more difficult because of my SCI," she says. "I do have a high-level injury and need so much assistance in my life. I'm sure I would be further along if I were able-bodied. However, there's no way I'm letting it stop me from living as my true self."

Straw also points out that perceptions of male-to-female transgendered people being fixated on ultra-feminine dresses and other clothes is, for the most part, a stereotype that needs to be challenged.

"I have changed my clothes, but not to a feminine extreme," she explains. "Physically, I look very masculine, so for me to wear a dress and do my makeup would not be the look I am going for at this point. As my body changes more physically, I will embrace a more feminine style, but for now it just wouldn't look right. Again, this is a transition and I'm only at the beginning stages of making my community more aware of my true self. Once that's put out there, and more of my features have feminized, I will feel more comfortable going out in public, presenting in a more feminine manner. That being said, who gets to say what is feminine and what is masculine? I know lots of ladies who wear jeans, a T-shirt and a baseball hat and look really beautiful. Is that not feminine?"

She adds that she's realistic about how she looks—and realizes that, at this point, nobody is going to mistake her as female from birth. "Just because I identify as a woman," she says, "does not mean that I must conform to what society sees as a typically feminine style."

She also says that easing up on the ultra-feminine approach makes it easier for friends and community members to accept her—something that she's been pleasantly surprised to see happen.

"Everything has been very positive and supportive. My circle of support has got-

ten bigger and bigger, and everyone who knows has expressed their total backing. People who transition tend to be better, happier people than transgender people who don't transition. So although there is change, it's a good, positive change."

She's grateful for the support. And not surprisingly, she's grateful for the gradual acceptance of transgender people in our society—and to the people who have helped make it happen.

"In the last few years, the awareness and support for trans people has grown significantly. With the help of people like Caitlyn Jenner, who chose to transition so publicly, and Justin Trudeau, who acknowledges the trans community and their rights, along with so many other activists throughout Canada and the USA, there is more understanding and protection for the transgender community."

She's well aware that, while she's not setting any precedents when it comes to the general public, she is helping to break a trail for others with SCI who also question their gender identity.

"Our limited choices are expanding because of the complicated nature of gender. Just because you're born with a penis or a vagina, that does not define you as a man or a woman. Once I revealed to my loved ones that I am transgender, I took a huge sigh of relief that I could finally start living as my true self. If you are transgender, regardless of whether you have an SCI or not, you have to honour your true self. It won't necessarily be a smooth path, especially if you have an SCI, but that's the nature of life. We encounter hiccups and speed bumps every day and those experiences can ultimately enrich our lives and make us better people." ■

*Want to know more? Straw suggests the book *My Husband Betty*, by Helen Boyd. "It's really well-written, and provides a wealth of information, both personal and scientific, about being transgender," she says. "Anyone who is on this path should take the time to read it."*

Photos of Taylor were taken at Swish Ladieswear. Taylor's makeup was done by Tanya Plows.