

Life Story: Manushia

I am Manushia from Zimbabwe and I've been living in South Africa for the past six years. Manushia is defined as a supermodel - I consider myself a female.

I remember that as a child, I had mixed feelings. I played with girls most of the time and when it came to household chores, my mother didn't have that kind of thing that "this is a boy's job and that is a girl's job". We just did what needed to be done. My father was a politician and a qualified accountant. My mom was a businesswoman and travel consultant. I cannot say we were rich, but we were middle class - we could really afford good things.

I did not have a close relationship with my father. I think he had actually seen that there's something wrong and having many sons from a previous marriage as well, he had been hoping for a girl. However, while he had a problem with me, I became closer to my mom. I didn't relate to her as just my mother, but also as a friend. The relationship I had with my brother was very difficult because he would always put me down. My sister and I had a very good relationship. She didn't see me as a bad person. She always talked about the way I act, saying things like "You know you act like a girl. Why can't you just stop acting like a girl and be a boy?" Most of the time I would try to impress her but then I found out that somehow I couldn't fit in. So I just lived the way I wanted because I found out that when you please everybody else you destroy yourself and you are not happy. I decided to make myself happy and to please myself before I pleased others.

When we moved back to Zimbabwe from the States where I completed half my schooling, I found it very difficult to adapt to the different lifestyle. My mom was Portuguese and my father Zimbabwean which meant that the traditional balance in the family life was thrown out because the one would say, "I want my child to learn this", and the other would say, "I want my child to learn that".

It was difficult to find myself in terms of my sexuality. I knew I was a boy genetically, but in my heart I had feelings that were very confusing. I tried to understand my feelings, tried to understand my body, and tried also to adapt to the culture. For me the most defining moment came when I found out my cousin was gay. I was quite shocked because he hadn't told me. However, he saw me as a gay feminine boy. I began to meet some of his gay friends, and the puzzle fell into place bit by bit until I realized that I was one of them. I started acting like a gay person until my first sexual encounter with a gay. That was when I knew I'm not actually gay. I really felt like a woman and if I tried to be gay it wouldn't work out. One day I read an article in a magazine about a male to female transition. That is when I knew I was transgender.

Most of my friends were female. I had boys as my friends more as a cover up. When I was with them they would mock me: "You act like a girl, you talk like a girl, why don't you just be a guy, once and for all." I tried but it never worked out. The teachers some-times liked to joke saying "I'm just like a 'sissy'", and although I would laugh with the class, it would also hurt me. It made me want to excel in something, so I started producing good grades. And the more jokes the harder I worked at school.

I was forced to wear the boy's uniform, whereas in the States, I could wear anything. I would wear unisex clothes and no one would know whether I was a boy or a girl; what-ever their eyes told them that was how they would see me. When I had to go to school in a boy's uniform I felt as if I was walking naked.

When I started experimenting sexually, I was still in high school. I met my gay friends through my cousin and we became a very close unit. One night I went out with one of my friends. He was staying with his partner in town. The place where I was staying only had transport until six o'clock, so I asked whether I could stay over at his place. We went to the gay centre and enjoyed ourselves then walked back to his place. My friend didn't tell me that he had fixed someone up for me. Well, being young and nervous, wanting to try new things, I had my first sexual encounter. Although in a way it made me happy, I was also angry that this was not for me. I wanted to be a woman.

Then my mom died of heart failure. I was devastated, confused. I was 15 years old and the following year I was supposed to write my matric examinations. I was in puberty, my body was changing, and I was trying to deal with my mom's death. It was then that my sister said to me, "You know what? People say you walk and talk like a girl, but when you're at home you don't." I said, "No, I'm not like that!" At that time I was just trying to protect the things I had because I had lost the person I loved most of all, and I didn't want to be rejected by family. With my brother I think it really took a lot of time for him to work up the courage to ask me, "Are you really this or not?" and I said, "No, I'm not"; and that was it.

I finished high school and passed with good grades. I decided to go to Malawi where I faced an immigration problem. While travelling there were always difficulties with immigration officers. They would say things like, "You picture

doesn't go well with the information on your passport". And I would ask them "What do you mean, because if I look at my picture, I can see it is me." The immigration officer wouldn't believe me and I had to strip naked for him to see that I was genetically a male.

I chose Malawi because my mother's friend was the Zimbabwean ambassador to Malawi. I thought if I go there at least we could communicate, and she could come down to me or I could go to her. While I was there a guy laid a charge against me. He said he was confused whether I was male or female. When the police came they said they were arresting me for being an illegal immigrant. I said I have my passport and they said I needed to show it at the police station. Instead of just being detained I was put in a normal cell with very hardcore criminals! Male criminals. I was in braids at that time and some of the Malawians had never seen such a thing. They said, "You are copying this from the western culture" I didn't feel like explaining to them. It was my first time in jail and being a 16-year-old in jail was so traumatic I became depressed. They kept me there for something like three weeks.

I was moved to another police station and they put an investigator in my cell without telling me he was an investigator. He was a bit friendly and I asked him what he had been arrested for. He said he had been on a flight from Johannesburg connecting in Malawi and was caught smuggling drugs. He was from Tanzania. We just talked and talked but I really felt that there was something else. During the night when he started touching me I thought what is guy up to? I didn't try to stop him, however, because I knew that if I reacted he would say "No, when I did this, he did that." The following morning when we were talking he said, "You know what? I think you're bewitched!" I told him I'm not bewitched but I was born like that. I decided to take out my braids. When I was half way through, a police officer came and said to me "You are going to have pictures taken!" I had reporters taking photos of me and I really felt degraded as an African.

They kept me in prison saying I'm an illegal immigrant. That is what they were saying on the charge sheets but that wasn't the fact. I went to the traditional court and before the session started I talked to one of the officials. He told me I could be sentenced, or they could make it public and hear from the public what the court should do, or I could be deported. I forced myself to bribe them and they found me not guilty. I decided to move on to Mozambique where I applied for citizenship. In 2004 when I was 16 I found that I was registered as a female in Mozambique. I wondered why my mom would register me as a female knowing I was born male. That is when I put the puzzles together about why my mom treated me as she did.

I wondered where I would be accepted as I am, without facing all the things that I and other people go through. That is when I thought about coming to South Africa and if it didn't work I would go back to the US.

I had stayed in Zimbabwe for 4 or 5 years. In the suburb where I grew up people just went on with their lives; they do what they have to do and are not concerned with the rest of the neighbourhood. So I didn't have any problems with people. However, when I walk amongst the gay community there are other straight acting gays who will sometimes pin-point and then I would feel so out of place. It wasn't that bad because the people mostly just got on with their lives. They might say things like, "You know you talk and act like a girl, what's your problem? You mustn't be like that, you must be straight acting", but they wouldn't kill you or do something drastic like that.

Then I decided to move on with my life and I came here [to South Africa]. I didn't know anyone. I just said to myself, if you're in search of a dream it doesn't matter if you have or don't have connections. I learnt not to depend on other people because I depended on my mother very much! I had dreams. I had lots of things I wanted to share with her. But I realized the day she died that I don't have to depend on people. She taught me that because the people she depended on would always let her down. From that experience, seeing my mother work out her own things, doing her own stuff, I realized I could look after myself.

When I came to South Africa I was looking for freedom and for a chance to enhance my future. The only thing I knew was that the LGBTI community was legalized. But I also had an idea of the male to female transitioning. Before I came I arranged accommodation and settled in Johannesburg. Eventually I got a job which luckily paid weekly wages. I managed to find my own place. I registered for FET - Further Education & Training and received a diploma in secretarial studies through correspondence. I also did a course in sales and marketing which helped me get a better paying job. After a while I took leave and went to Cape Town. I lived in Cape Town for something like three months before going back to Johannesburg.

I resumed work and met some of my gay friends from Zimbabwe. It was very good for me because I wasn't associating with people, even at work. So when I met up with my friends I tried to make up for all the time we missed and we had a very good relationship. At that time, I was thinking that I had adapted to South Africa and settled in, but I found that I was more stressed, distressed, depressed . . . anything that you can think of. I found myself in shambles because here I was, working and going to school; I could buy myself anything without anyone stopping me, but I wasn't happy relationship-wise. So I resigned from my work and I looked for another job in Cape Town.

When I went back to Cape Town I attended a course where I met a gay guy from Congo. I wanted to associate with him

in the beginning but I couldn't because I had my friends. Those friends knew me as male but they didn't know the other side of me. I started socializing with that friend of mine because he lived in the same apartment block. While talking one day he told me about Triangle Project and gave me the number. I called them and an appointment was set up for me with Sharon. I went to see Sharon and talked to her of my feelings about transsexuality. She told me about Gender Dynamix and told me that if I'm considering surgery there were certain procedures involved. I called Gender Dynamix and Caroline really helped me with information and all that I needed. Gender Dynamix has been very helpful to me because I've met a lot of different people and it really provided me with answers to most of my questions.

I live by myself. I'm still working and studying because I found out that you cannot achieve anything without working for it. I'm still doing sales and marketing and I work for Associated Magazines. I really like it even though it is a demanding job.

I'm able to express myself because it's not a very large community and the people just concentrate on their own lives. The only people I talk to are the ones who know that I was a male; otherwise people know me as a female. The most amazing thing is that my boss is very accepting. When I went for the interview she just said "Ok, this is you, that's fine, you've got the job". She was really very understanding and she's like a mother figure to me.

I feel very heterosexual so I tend to date straight guys. When it comes to the sexual department I always have a reason for not participating. I don't feel I want to come out yet because I'm afraid of losing the person.

I don't need to consult my family about transitioning because when I was growing up my brother and my sister weren't very interested in the way I felt. They only concentrated on the outside of me. Everything I did or didn't do didn't concern them but they didn't try to stop me for that. If I tell them they would say, "No, you mustn't go there, don't do that..."; I stopped listening to anyone and started listening to myself. So with this whole surgery thing I don't have to consult them, but I get the feeling that my brother has changed. I can sense from his voice that he's listening to me and he gives me time to say what I want to say. I'm planning to go home and explain everything he wants to know and whether he accepts me or not, it will be okay, because I've lived with rejection for most of my life. My sister will be the difficult one. I think she wouldn't accept it but will tolerate me for the sake of her daughter. I'm closer to her daughter than she is and maybe she will accept me for that reason.

Financially, I will not be able to pay for surgery right now especially because I'm still studying. But as a young person who has experienced many things, I think I will make it. For now I am wearing an artificial, strap on bra which most people think are real. But when I start hormone therapy I'll have my own breasts. I'm really prepared to do the whole thing. I'm 20 years old and most people my age are starting university which I have already gone through and I'm working. I want to achieve my dream, and then get my degree in female sociology after I have had the operation. In five or ten years I want to see myself as the real Manushia inside and out, probably married with my adopted kids and hopefully one day living with my sister's daughter.