

The Big Out

Wendy embarks on the first day of the rest of her life

I'd lived as a female outside of work for about a year, totally confident, I'd go anywhere and do anything. But even this wasn't enough there was still something wrong in my life. I knew that I had to move on. . . .I just didn't know how to go about it. It seemed to me that I had two choices. I could disappear and pop up somewhere else, as someone else. Maybe this way I would be accepted as a female and wouldn't get any hassle from anyone. Or I could come out at work in my home town and try to keep everything in my life that I've worked for. This way I may have to suffer some bigotry, but would it be worth it?

I needed help; I had no idea of what to do next. I chatted to a couple of the girls and they convinced me that the latter option would be the best. So on the advice of my friends I contacted the Gender Trust. They sent me several documents. One explained how to "formally" come out to your employer, whilst another was an employer's guide to transgender in the workplace. Upon reading these documents I thought they made a lot of sense. I'm not a brave person, far from it; it's just that I felt that I had no other option.

I spoke to my family first to gauge their opinion. No one voiced any negative opinions, so I set about writing a formal letter of disclosure to the Human Resources Department (HRD) at my factory. Firstly I arranged a meeting with HRD at 9 a.m. I explained my problem to a lady called Tina; and that I expected her to have little or no knowledge of this condition. I explained that I have an incurable illness, which was not fatal, but is treatable. I explained the causes of my problem; I gave them a letter from my doctor. I gave them a copy of "An Employer's Guide to Transsexuality in the Workplace" and a copy of the current medical thinking. Then I handed her my formal letter. She read it quietly, and agreed that she had no such knowledge. So I went on and explained my life history to her. To my initial surprise, she was very interested and attentive. Finally I gave her a picture of myself "dressed", as I thought everybody's first impression is that of a member of the Rocky Horror cast. So I wanted to set that one straight. Tina said that she would take away this information, read it and get back to me later that day.

I went back to my job, "Phew!" It was a relief in one way, but there was still some apprehension, and still a way to go. Later that day Tina phoned me up and asked me to come at 4 p.m. for another meeting. Panic! Panic! Panic! We sat down in a private meeting room, Tina said that she had read the information that I had supplied her and had found it very interesting. She then went on to say that she had spoken to the higher management and they had said unequivocally that they were prepared to support me one hundred percent. You could have knocked me over with a feather. Tina explained that although they were prepared to support me, they had no idea of where to go from here. I said, "I can help with that." The Gender Trust had also given me the name of a professional counselor who could advise companies on these matters and I gave a telephone number to Tina. She expressed a genuine wish to get to know as much about transgender issues as possible, particularly as she would be dealing with my case personally. She went on to tell me that she had given all the medical information etc to my manager, and that he had taken it home to read. She told me that he was OK about it and wanted to speak to me later.

Paul is a very straight talking man. We sat in the office, and I could hardly believe my ears. He told me that "Hand on Heart" as he put it, he had not been aware that this was a medical problem. He was now! There is a TS who lives in his home town, who had some bad press in the tabloids. He explained to me that he would now look upon this other person in a different light. He went on to tell me that he had the greatest respect for my work and my professionalism and that it didn't matter what he had to call me or what I was wearing, and that he wanted to move forward with this as quickly as possible.

I spent another day in a state of shock. I had lost sleep over all this. I had moved my finances around against the need that I would have to make them liquid very quickly. I expected and prepared for the worst and what happened? Everyone was absolutely bloody marvelous. I felt ashamed of myself, having such a profoundly low opinion of others before I had given them a chance. Smacks of reverse bigotry don't it.

The following week in work, Tina phoned and said that she had been in touch with this counselor and would like a meeting to discuss what we were going to do next. She, I and my manager Paul met again. It was decided that we would hold two meetings with all members of my department and explain the issues to them, giving them an opportunity to ask any relevant questions. The same day there would be a strategy meeting at director level, so they would use this opportunity to explain things to other department heads whose responsibility it would be to inform their own personnel. The plan was that I would then appear in my new role the next day. Following our little strategy meeting Tina took me down to the female locker room and issued me with my new company uniform and explained the dress code for a female at my level.

That weekend I went out shopping. The company uniform doesn't include skirts, but you are expected to wear a particular style. Not too short and no denim etc. I spent quite a time that weekend "Coming out" to several of my work colleagues and my other relatives, aunts, uncles and cousins etc., all the people who I would rather they heard the news

from myself, rather than second hand. Everyone I spoke to was so understanding and so supportive, I was beginning to wonder if I was ever going to get a bad response from any one.

Monday evening, I didn't sleep too well. Tuesday morning arrived. The clock ticked around somewhat slowly. Paul, my manager told me that he and Tina had prepared literature and were planning to hold the first meeting at 1.30p.m. and a second at 2.30p.m. Following that they would speak to the other department heads who would in turn advise their own personnel. The literature was relevant to transgender in the work place, the medical view and the company's policy. I ate my lunch at 1p.m. as usual, somewhat apprehensively, knowing full well what the after dinner chatter would be about. My friends Gareth and Mike consoled me over dinner. Bless them they were as worried as me. Paul said that I would not be required to attend the meeting, but I stayed nearby in case anyone had any questions that they wanted me to answer.

The first meeting went by; everybody filed out and went to their work. "Phew!" so far so good. At least no bad reactions yet, I thought. Then, Marge came to find me. First thing she did was picking me up and gave me a big hug. Marge said that she and Jack would wait for me in the car park in the morning and walk in with me as Wendy. I honestly felt I needed support like that and I was so grateful to get it. Next in came Vicki, again she wished me all the best and her 100% support. Then my ex colleagues (the female supervisors) from my old section, Andrea and Lisa, followed by more and more of the girls. All had the same message of support. A few of the boys also came to see me, again the same thing. I felt that I should pinch myself to wake up. This was far better than any dream that I could have imagined, and as I'm no fiction writer, better than anything that I could have made up. Poor Jack, who works with me, must have been getting fed up by now, having heard my life story repeated too many times to mention, but I felt that everyone who asked was entitled to a clear explanation. The day was almost done and people were even passing the odd good-humored remark. I felt that this was a good thing as they were obviously beginning to accept the situation and the ice had been broken. For the first time everybody knew my Fem name, by now also my legal name, and were apologising in advance if they messed up at any point. I explained that I wasn't a bit worried and expected a sinking in period. That working day ended with me traveling home on cloud nine.

My next step was Wednesday. . . The first day of my new life. I got up a little earlier than usual, a little apprehensive and very excited in a strange way. I really wanted to create the right impression. I bathed, gave myself a bit of a preening, put my hair up - no one in work would have ever seen it like this before - and then got dressed and did my makeup. No turning back now girl, I thought. We have a company uniform and a strict dress code, but ladies are always allowed a little leeway with their clothing. I must admit I dressed down a little, I didn't want to create the wrong impression, but I thought that I had it about right.

As I entered the car park, I stopped feeling nervous. I suppose I knew I just had to do it. I parked the car and as promised Jack and Marge was waiting to escort me in. Gareth had just pulled up and decided to walk in with us. Nobody batted an eyelid.... I clocked in and passed through my old department. The girls who were in early immediately came up to me for a chat and to wish me the best of luck on my first day as Wendy. I thanked them and went to hang up my coat and store my handbag. I popped my head into the office and introduced myself as a "new starter" to the manager, Paul. We all laughed and I went for a quick cuppa. At 8 o'clock I went to my workplace, and what happened next continued throughout the day. One of the boys came in slightly shaken, he explained to me that he didn't know what to say or how to act, but he wished me all the best with what I was doing. I thanked him for his courage, and went on to explain that it has taken me 40 years to understand it myself, so I didn't expect everyone to get everything right straight away. I also said "don't worry about putting your foot in it", these things will take time. Others came up to me in this way. I thought "It must be harder for boys", the way that they are brought up, and all that; but they were being brave enough to speak to me, so the least I could do was give them the best explanation that I could. The girls were much easier going, much more open and easier for me to speak to. Everyone to a person was giving me 100% support. During the entire day not one person made any derogatory remark, or said anything in the slightest way unkind. The day ended as it had begun, everyone was still wishing me all the best.