

A mother's love...

By Leigh Ann van der Merwe

Many of us have heard the saying ‘you strike a woman, and you strike a rock’! This statement has never been more true where it concerns the life of Mignon Knoetze, the mother of a transgender teenager from East London. This rising activist took to the battlefield with the education system of an entire province and rose above it victoriously. So many times the role of a SOFFA (Significant other, friends, family and allies) is overlooked. They play a very supportive role and yet many times they themselves have very little or no support. This article celebrates the role of a remarkable mother.

‘My son was born female but I noticed from the age of four years he was developing male qualities and refused to wear female clothing’. She says it became a never ending struggling to get her daughter dressed and to behave in line with what society determined to be female behavior. More than that, it was a struggle raising her child as a single parent. Circumstances went from bad to worse when it came to school, particularly high school. ‘This is the time when teenagers find their place in the world. Having to wear a girl’s uniform to school was a struggle for my son’. She describes the influence and advice from family and friends as being misguided sometimes. ‘A friend once advised me not to encourage my child’s gender variant behavior and said it was ridiculous for my son to express this desire of gender transition’. This advice meant the end of a twenty year friendship but Mignon chose to support her transgendered child.

She enrolled her son at Cambridge High School in East London, which turned out to be very traumatic for him. Mignon says her son experienced pre-judice at school and there seemed to exist a great deal of ignorance around gender issues. She says this attitude resulted in depression and anxiety which manifested in panic attacks. ‘It was difficult getting him out of bed and dressed in morning. It gave me such a helpless feeling and I soon grew desperate’.

She approached the school and its governing body who just dismissed the idea to accommodate gender variance and to change its uniform code. Out of sheer desperation she turned to the media to pursue this issue. The Daily Dispatch first published an article on the 6th of December 2010 about the difficulties of being a transgender teenager. This was followed by a TV interview on the ETV prime time news. Both forms of media exposed what was happening at Cambridge High School and the discrimination this teenager experienced. The case was referred to the Commission of Gender Equality in East London. ‘Kerry Oosthuizen, who is the legal advisor for the CGE in East London has been amazing and truly supportive in this fight’, says Mignon.

The Superintendent General of Education in the Eastern Cape, Advocate Modidima Manyi issued a statement offering guidelines on how schools should deal with gender related issues. Soon after the statement was issued, the SG asked the family to identify three schools that they would like this transgender teenager to attend. ‘We pointed out Hudson Park High School but found them to be equally prejudiced’, says Mignon.

Eventually, Mignon found a school in the area where her son is allowed the dress code of the boys and has settled in comfortably. The school requested not to be identified in the media. She says life has improved for the family as a whole and her son is doing very well. They have recently travelled to Cape Town to see the team of doctors at the Transgender Clinic at Groote Schuur Hospital. The teenager was assessed by the resident psychologist, passed onto the endocrinologist where he had his first testosterone shot. She describes this experience as being a great leap towards the physical transition.

If nothing else, this determined mother proved how protective women are concerning their children. About her great accomplishment of taking on an entire school system, she says ‘I feel proud, it is something I never thought we would achieve’. Her advice to other parents: ‘Listen to your child and never give up. Fight the system; we have a brilliant constitution with good mechanisms in place to deal with issues of this nature’. She also advises that one has to form alliances with all the right people in furthering your agenda. Concerning her attractive young son, she jokes: ‘I will have to get a shot gun’.