

## GDX at the Gender Odyssey Family Conference

Gender Odyssey is an international conference focused on the needs and interests of gender non-conforming and transgender people from across North America and around the world. The family conference is an annual event for families who are working to navigate the day-to-day realities of raising a gender non-conforming or transgender child. As one of the only opportunities in the USA to find valuable resources, information and networking opportunities, Gender Odyssey Family provides real tools to support and encourage gender self-discovery.

Charmain Hulme\*, a parent of a transgender child and member of the Gender DynamiX Parent Support Group, recently attended the Gender Odyssey Family Conference in Seattle on behalf of Gender DynamiX. Her involvement with Gender DynamiX in particular and transgender issues in general is not incidental and she has immersed herself completely into this process by getting involved and not only staying involved but trying to make a difference in the lives of other families sharing the same experiences and challenges.

Charmain's involvement came as a result of two suicide attempts by her child before he was twenty. He had not come out to his parents and tried to live the life of a female and failing. Doing as much research as she could, she soon found out about Gender DynamiX which was still in its infancy at that stage. Charmain soon discovered that it was not going to be an easy journey. "It was not because of the family's lack of support or failure to accept his status, but due to the inadequacies of our social system. The system that was supposed to protect us had failed us and let us down instead," Charmain said. She added that her son was a young man at the beginning of an amazing journey and had the opportunity to live the rest of his life without stigma. He could look forward to a life of relative normality, with everything within his grasp including the support of his family, financial stability, and wonderful laws in place. Unfortunately, however, the laws were being ignored and not implemented at all.

Charmain admitted that her son's story is one that comes from a privileged and advantaged background and they had the resources and knowledge to fight the system. For the majority of South Africans this is not the case. "We need to look at this issue within the right context," she said. What needed to be understood are the demographics, economic and social status of South Africa. South Africa is a multi-cultural society, a society where a major part of the nation was oppressed and majorly disadvantaged for a very long time. This in itself then created a society who even years after the apartheid laws had been abolished still remain totally uninformed, uneducated, and very, very poor.

She further reported that Gender DynamiX on average has five to six applications a month from people waiting to change the identity documents to reflect their new gender status. In Cape Town alone there are at least 25 known cases of people still waiting for their documents to be changed twelve to eighteen months down the line. Amongst others who were struggling with their identity documentation, we chose to highlight Robert Hamblin's case, because we thought it would be a good opportunity to make use of or take advantage of the fact that he was well connected with the media and we could use them in order to try and highlight the problems we were experiencing and gratefully Robert agreed to work with the media in order to try and make a case in point. In 2009, Robert tried to set a precedent with his application, documenting all correspondence as they occurred along the way during his process. At the time Robert was working with the Home Affairs 'Turn around team' who were trying to correct the process so he had access to information and could track the process of his application. With both legal resources and pressure from the organisation, it took Robert fourteen months before his documents were changed. He documented every single stage in the process and was convinced that this case would set the precedent for others to follow but to no avail. Only the threat of media intervention or legal action incites them to proceed in any form or manner.

Charmain went on to talk about another issue which is a major problem for transgender people and that is access to health care. Even the more privileged people have a limited amount of options available to them. As matters stand at the moment there are only a few medical practitioners who can advise guide and monitor transition in so far as medication is concerned. Most transgender people who can afford it will travel overseas for gender operations. There are also only a handful of professionals who are experienced enough to perform the genital surgeries and mostly these operations are not covered by medical insurance.

Those who cannot receive or afford private medical care need to go to state-run hospitals. At present there are only two who qualify to perform these surgeries. They have a full complement of staff including psychiatrists, psychologists, endocrinologists, gynaecologists and plastic surgeons to assist in the process. They also assist with hormonal treatment and guidance during transition.

"However, they can only perform four of these surgeries a year and in the light of our socio-economic status in this country, a number of transgender persons have been on the waiting list for reconstructive surgery and will wait up to twenty years before they will have the opportunity for this surgery. For years their lives will be on hold," Charmain said.

Another problem is getting hormonal treatment. Most hospitals will not commence hormonal treatment unless the

person has a date booked for surgery. Out of sheer desperation people are forced to self-medicate, often obtaining inferior medication and ending up with bigger problems.

Charmain further noted that transgender activists from other African countries also place their hopes on treatment in South Africa as not only are there no facilities, any form of gender variance is criminalised with prison sentences ranging from four to seven years or, as in some countries, even the death penalty may apply.

Intimidation, victimisation, violence and abuse are not uncommon, especially in the townships where gender variance is not tolerated. Both men and women are expected to perform certain gender expectant roles within their family as well as their community and when they deviate from that expectation they place themselves in extreme danger.

\*Name changed to protect the privacy of people involved.