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Women's Studies: How transgender ladies learn to walk the walk

By Karmah Elmusa

Six people sit at attention around a small wooden table, listening carefully to speech therapist Lynette Nesbit. She's explaining the practice of elongating single syllable words to make them sound more feminine. "It's not 'Hi,'" she says. "It's more like, 'Hiiii-eeee-eee.'" "Hiii-eeee-eeee," they repeat in unison. Nesbit goes around in a circle, asking each person to try it on their own. They're tentative, even nervous at first, but Nesbit rewards every attempt with an exclamation of praise. Slowly, the group relaxes and begins to enjoy the seminar, which is titled "Why Women Sound Like Women."

All six of the seminar's participants were born men. They're at various stages in transition from male-to-female, and most are over 50 and relatively new to womanhood. Cynthia Norwood, who is 68 years old, has been recreating herself for only eleven months, and frequents the Northern California boutique where the seminar is being held. She's a short, demure woman who, in her sweater dress and pearls, might be someone's elderly aunt. She sports a stylish haircut and a healthy smattering of bling-y jewelry, and sits with her back ruler-straight. The posture is likely a remnant of her army days—as a young man, Norwood served 14 months in a Vietnam combat unit.

With Nesbit and other coaches, she's been working not only on her image (hair, clothing, makeup, and the like), but also on movement, mannerisms, and on this particular day, voice. "I feel like recently, I can pass until I open my mouth to speak," Norwood confides in the group. "I have a lot of work to do on that."

In 2008, the National Center for Transgender Equality surveyed 7,000 people, asking how often people strangers recognize them as transgender. Only 21 percent replied "Never," meaning a vast majority of transgender folks often worried about "passing," or being perceived as their chosen gender. For someone like Norwood, passing isn't just a question of vanity. Many transgender women's emotional, financial and physical well-being depends on their ability to be seen as genetically female. Not passing can shut doors to employment, to friendships, and to a healthy self-image and happiness. Depression plagues both MtoF (male-to-female) and FtoM (female-to-male) trans people—over half attempt suicide at some point in their lives. Many risk becoming victims of violence.

In the early hours of Sunday, April 29, a transgender woman named Brandy Martell was shot to death in downtown Oakland. Martell was socializing in her car with three other transgender women when two men approached the window to chat. After a lengthy, cordial conversation, the women revealed they were transgender. The men hardly reacted, but then abruptly turned away and wandered back down the street. They returned two hours later, and this time, one of them stuck the barrel of an automatic weapon into a crack in Martell's window, shooting her in the side. The other women fled as Martell tried to drive away—the gunman kept firing into

the car, and Martell made it only as far as the intersection before keeling over onto the steering wheel, debilitated by her wounds. The shooter and the other man got away on foot, and Martell died on the scene.

Martell was 37-years-old. She was bright, and known for her wicked sense of humor; a master impersonator, she morphed into exaggerated versions her friends and family with ease. She was close to her mom and dad. She worked as a peer advocate at TransVision, a Fremont-based program that offers psychological and medical support to transgender people. In death, though, Martell's story becomes all too typical—thousands of transgender women, especially women of color like Martell, have been found out, and killed in the street.

With so much at stake, transgender women are willing to invest time, money and exhaustive effort into becoming a woman that society will not question. To meet this market, a veritable industry around “feminization” has sprung up around the country, particularly in liberal-leaning pockets like the Bay Area. Medical procedures aside (that includes surgeries and hormone treatments), there are image consultants, voice coaches, movement coaches and therapists that help those transitioning from male-to-female to shed the mannish behaviors of their past. And while the definition of what it means to be transgender is broadening every day—some transgender women are happy to be more masculine or gender-neutral—for those who want to truly “pass” as female, putting on a dress is just the beginning.

Born Fred Albert Norwood, Cynthia Ann Norwood spent the first seven decades of her life as a man. She's been a soldier, an engineer, a father, and a husband (four times over). Last year, after decades of closeted cross-dressing after work, Norwood decided to take her gender preference into the light of day and make a permanent change. She brought out the dresses, stockings and high heels she'd been hiding, and began living full time as a woman. She asked family and friends to begin calling her Cynthia, and started a course of hormone treatment that blocks her natural testosterone and replaces it with estrogen. The estrogen can soften angular facial features, promote breast growth, and over time, can even widen hips to give transgender women a more feminine shape. But it's not all physical—according to Norwood, it has another curious side effect. “I'm much more emotional now,” she says. “I'm warmer. And I cry a lot more than I used to.”

Estrogen introduces new features and feelings at any age, but Norwood's story is unique because she transitioned later in life. “I'm faced with challenges that people who transitioned earlier don't have,” says Norwood of the decades of male behavior that she's working to shake. “My ex wife knew all about it—I told her early on. She made comments like, ‘You'd make a terrible woman.’ I let it bother me for a long time.”

Negative feedback like this fed a wrenching fear of disapproval that Norwood battled for years while living as a man. “For a long time, I kept it deeply hidden,” she

says. "It was a big secret, and I was terrified that someone would find out." This fear informed her decision to stay closeted for so long. But even after she began living full time as a woman, Norwood remained anxious. Each new person she told, and each old haunt that she visited as her new self was a fresh challenge. Will someone know? If they do, how will they react? Rather than curbing her feelings of being a misfit, Norwood says, transitioning opened up new anxieties. Before, no one questioned that she was a man, but something was missing, she says. "Now I feel comfortable on the inside, but I'm not fully at ease moving around in public."

Eventually, Norwood hopes to have genital reassignment surgery. While it's commonly thought that this procedure is a mark of a "true" gender transition, many transgender people don't ever take this step. Some can't afford it, but some simply don't need new genitals to feel fully female, or fully male, depending. In Norwood's case, the reason is monetary. Until the day comes (or if it comes) that the surgery is in her financial reach, she's focused on perfecting the female parts of herself that the world sees every day: her look, her movement, her voice, and her means of interaction, to name just a few.

She does this work predominantly at the boutique where she's sitting now, a store and social space designed specifically for men to come and experiment with cross-dressing either on occasion, or in preparation to begin their lives as full-time women. Here, Norwood has crafted her feminine style, and even taken classes the boutique owner offers titled "Stylish Lady." Transgender women learn to walk in heels, get in and out of cars in a skirt, and work on feminizing their mannerisms and body language. It's difficult, for example, for the formerly-male to make a habit of taking smaller bites at meals, or engaging new acquaintances with eye contact and a flurry of questions. Whether all women ask more questions than men is beside the point, the experts say. Most do, so if you're trying to be feminine, learn to pry.

Also, learn to pay stringent attention to the subtleties of female conversation. At the end of Nesbit's voice class, Norwood approaches her to talk about the possibility of some private lessons. When Nesbit quotes her price, Norwood's eyes go wide, and she explains that as a retiree with rent and hormone therapy to pay for, her budget won't allow for extras like that. Then, she offers payment in the form of a favor. "But maybe, if you want, you could give me the lessons and I could come over and mow your lawn or something in return," she says to Nesbit, and then stops herself, realizing what she's done. Sixty-eight year old women don't normally offer mow lawns. They sit on them, sipping iced tea.

Norwood, on balance, is lucky that she has this network of support. She can make mistakes, and her teachers and peers will gently correct her. For women without access to in-person training like this, there are services like Feminizationsecrets.com. Run by coach and genetic woman Lucille Sorella, the online-based training site for transgender women offers videos, DVDs, and how-to tutorials on everything from makeup application to the art of the feminine sneeze (you heard it here: Men and women sneeze, and cough, differently). Transitioning

women need to consciously substitute a delicate, high-pitched, “a-choo!” for the inarticulate bellow they’ve been expelling for years.

Sorella is a former dancer, and most of her expertise lies in movement training. Men, she says, are more rigid in their movements, while women move gracefully. “Everything is more fluid,” says Sorella. “Standing up, sitting down, picking things up. Women are more flexible than men, because female hormones loosen the ligaments. And men carry more tension in their bodies.”

Based on these observations, Sorella has developed instructional DVDs (most of which cost money), but the site offers some free videos on basics like walking. One of them stars physical therapist and movement expert Robert Brinded, showing off a hip stretch that he says will feminize even the most macho of struts. “There’s a certain way a woman walks,” he says. “When it’s done correctly, it shows good health, femininity, and strength.” On another page, Sorella offers advice on feminine communication, with very direct tips on topics like vocabulary. “Men and women use different words for the same thing,” she writes. “For example, a guy might call the lower abdomen the ‘gut’ or ‘belly,’ whereas a woman would be more likely to call it the ‘tummy’ or ‘abdomen.’”

Voice coaches, like San-Francisco-based speech pathologist Carol Freidenberg, take this kind of communication work a step further, moving into issues like tone, pitch and inflection. Transgender women have the option of vocal chord surgery, but it often results in an unnaturally high voice—the coaching approach is widely considered to be safer. Freidenberg has been working with male-to female clients since 1979. She was approached by her first transgender client out of the blue, and since then has made it her business to learn the ins and outs of male and female speech patterns, and teaching people how to shift from one to the other.

“The most typical scenario is people just coming in first to explore, to see what they can do,” Freidenberg says. “They’ll tell me, ‘I do not like the way I sound, what can be achieved?’ I’ll try to set realistic goals with them.” Next, Freidenberg takes her clients through a number of different vocal properties, considering which they might improve. The big one is pitch. Wherever a transgender woman is starting from, her voice is normally much lower than she wants it to be, but with extensive practice, she can learn to speak at a higher pitch all the time. Women also tend to have a sing-song-y quality to their voice, where as men are typically more monotonous.

Back at the boutique, Nesbit tries to impart similar wisdom to her pupils, demonstrating how her voice goes up in a lilt at the end of her sentences. One of the attendees has had the vocal cord surgery, giving her a voice a shrill, Mickey Mouse-like quality. It’s hard to say whether she has a leg up on the others. They’re on the opposite end of the spectrum, struggling to break through the masculine tones they’ve been speaking in for decades. Many try a breathy, phone-sex operator like approach, which Nesbit quickly corrects. “Definitely don’t do the breathy thing,” she says. “Women don’t really talk like that.”

Tiffany Woods transitioned over a decade ago. She's tall, for a woman, but she's beautifully styled and confident, and on a Wednesday, as on every weekday, she's sprinting around the Tri-City Health Center in Fremont, trying to juggle the work she does as the director of the TransVision segment of the clinic (Brandy Martell, the shooting victim, worked there too, and knew Woods). The clinic specializes in AIDS diagnosis and care, but the section Woods runs also helps people in transition with hormones and finding the resources they need.

For Woods, the circus of image coaching, voice coaching and classes was never as important as it is for so many of her fellow transgender women. Now 48, Woods had a built-in support that, it turns out, is a blessing when it comes to perfecting your femininity. She had a wife. Or has, rather—Woods and her wife Brigitte have been married since they were in their early 20s, and were together when Woods made her transition. So instead of paying people to help her unlearn all of her masculine behaviors, she took advantage of her coach at home.

“My wife met me before transition,” Woods says. “But before we went out in public, we were experimenting with clothes and everything at home. She would help me. I got one-on-one girl training, the same way you would get going through high school with your girlfriends. She'd say, ‘No don't sit like that, no don't eat like that. No, don't bend over in that skirt.’ Working on the face, working on the voice, being comfortable in your skin. It's nice to have someone sitting across from you, giving you the right pointers.”

Woods and her wife, who now have three children together, worked tirelessly on her affect, wardrobe and movement—and it shows. Woods says she feels lucky that she had such a young, vibrant role model—many transgender women who can't afford expensive image and voice consultants use more rudimentary methods like mimicking their mothers. Other common and less expensive practices include sitting in a mall or public space and observing women, using whatever free resources the internet has to offer, and imitating the inflections and voice patterns of actresses and TV personalities.

Woods and many other transgender women find the most frustrating part of the great gender switch to be that they've already done it. Many, but not all, transgender people have been battling instincts to live as the opposite sex from a very early age—in Woods' case, that meant overcompensating in high school by focusing on bodybuilding and sports. “Our generation was trying to fit into male society, and in order to do that and survive, you had to do that hyper-masculine stuff so that nobody would know you were trans,” says Woods. “I went to a Catholic all-boys high school and I was very scrawny. I beefed up, I did martial arts. It was exhausting to act macho all the time.”

Woods transitioned early enough, however, that she won't be struggling with voice inflection and behavior into her 70s, as Norwood will. These days, males are

transitioning younger and younger and abandoning any gendered behaviors they had so early that by adulthood, they'll be barely noticeable. The latest trend is to tackle gender transition earlier than ever, even before puberty. Today, if a boy expresses a concrete desire to become female—and has accepting and supportive parents—he can be placed on a course of drugs commonly known as “puberty blockers.” These slow the growth of secondary sex characteristics so the boy's shoulders won't broaden, and he won't develop that unmistakable upper-lip fuzz. His voice won't drop to irretrievable depths, and his nose and jaw will retain their soft, childlike shape. When he enters adulthood and wants to transition, his battle will be a significantly easier one to fight.

At almost 70, Norwood is squarely in the opposite camp. Her late transition left her with a huge amount of work: her voice is far from perfect, and she's still mastering the finer points of movement and style. As Norwood talks about the fashion risks she took at the beginning of her transition, the boutique's owner jumps in to poke a little fun. “We went to Vegas last year, and she bought PINK UGGS,” the owner says, laughing. “I'm all for experimentation, but that was going too far!”

Experimentation, it turns out, is a huge part of male-to-female transition. Caked on makeup, jewels to the grocery store, and age inappropriate fashion choices (think UGGS) are a few of the cardinal sins women in the early stages of transition commit. These misguided attempts at femininity often give transgender women away, and many of them choose to use the resources like this boutique and the “Fashion” tab on Feminizationsecrets.com to avoid inadvertent mistakes. While Norwood worked on her look privately for many years, the early stages of transition are often likened to female adolescence, when girls try out various styles (some more attractive than others), before they settle on something that suits them. “People may start out trying on lots of make up, trying on mini-skirts,” says therapist Lisette Lahana, who works with women in transition. “It's like they're younger—teenage girls are often more hyper-sexy. And some remain sexy. But a lot of women I work with over time develop a style that's more typical of their age.”

This freedom to experiment, particularly in public, is not something that all transgender women enjoy—in fact, it's a rarity in this country and the world over. Many women cross state lines to seek the professional help they need—many will never dare to transition publically. Lahana has a client who drives two hours away from the conservative town she lives in to try dressing as a woman in public. “For her, it's a real safety issue if she's not passing,” Lahana says. “If you're starting to cross dress for the first time, it's important to go somewhere safe. This woman I'm working with—if she happens to go with a Starbucks or McDonald's and if she's read as a male, it's physically dangerous for her.”

Two weeks after our first meeting, Tiffany Woods is standing at a podium in Oakland's Preservation Park. She's addressing a somber, sizable crowd—its Woods' dubious honor to host the city's 2011 Transgender Day of Remembrance event. Held

every year, the ceremony commemorates transgender women who were victims of fatal violence over the last 364 days. Volunteers read the names of the dead—which are collected from dozens of countries—the ages, and the locations their bodies were discovered. Most are young, many are found in their own homes, and some are found without identification, never to be claimed by loved ones. Last year, Brandy Martell helped Woods organize the event. This year, her name will be on the list of the deceased.

The world is hard on transgender women. People react intensely, in one way or another, to being faced with a person whose gender isn't immediately clear. Barbara Barnes, a professor of gender and women's studies at UC Berkeley, says that not knowing what gender a person is can be disorienting. "As human beings walking around in the world, we want other people to recognize us as fully human with rights, with some kind of autonomy over who we are," she says. "As it turns out, it differs what the criteria is according to culture and time and place, but usually gender is a really important element of that recognition."

If you're a person who isn't easily recognizable in one of the gender categories that our culture accepts, Barnes says, you're not automatically understood by those who meet you. People don't have a way to categorize you, or to see your humanity. At the best, most transgender women say, people will find this curious. At the worst, it elicits the hallmark of all prejudice: irrational anger. Tiffany Woods advises women in the early stages of transition to avoid public scenarios where they can be watched at length, like standing in line at the bank. "One thing that's actually improved the safety of trans-women is cell phones. People look down now instead of looking at each other," Woods says. "But still, I always coach people early in transition to avoid lines. Being stared at like that is not good for your confidence or your self-esteem."

As much as the negative attention hurts, moments of affirmation make it all worth it for some. Most transgender women have a story, or stories, of a sweet moment in which womanhood became a reality. An Oakland woman, named Carol, was in an elevator with an elderly female and a man. When the man got out, the older woman turned to her and commented on the "cute boy," and then giggled. For the first time, Carol felt like she was part of the sisterhood she'd been yearning for. Tiffany Woods attended a black tie party, and didn't get the slew of compliments on her evening gown and hair that she'd come to expect. Her friend told her: "The drag queens get the attention because they're so over the top. You didn't get any attention tonight because you're a woman now. You crossed a line, and now nobody knows."

Recently, Norwood's noticed a change, too. Even though her voice has a ways to go, her pink UGG days are behind her and friends tell her she's passing more successfully than ever. Recently, she was the recipient of flirtatious male attention, courtesy of a cashier at a gas station. For a long time, she's avoided shopping in places she used to go as a man for fear of being recognized. But last week, her garbage disposal broke—forced into action by a faulty appliance, she went to her old hardware store. She interacted with several of the sales people. She checked out. All as a woman, all without question. Then, just when she thought she was safe, she

walked right past a family member she hadn't seen since she became Cynthia. He didn't recognize her at all. "I was so happy," she says. "That's when I knew that I was really, truly passing."

Source List:

Barbara Barnes: Lecturer in Gender and Women's Studies, UC Berkeley

Carol Dauley: Transgender woman, Oakland

Lin Fraser: WPATH President, San Francisco

Carol Friedenbergl: Speech Pathologist, San Francisco

Kim Hraca: Speech Pathologist, San Francisco

Lisette Lahana: Therapist, Oakland

Louise Monsour: Therapist, The Pacific Center, Berkeley

Cynthia Norwood: Transgender woman, San Jose

Dr. Kit Rachlin: Therapist, New York

Aejaie Sellers: Boutique Owner, San Jose (is not identified in the piece)

Lucille Sorella: Owner of Feminizationsecrets.com, San Francisco

Jamie Wolfe: Transgender woman, Oakland

Tiffany Woods: Transgender woman and TransVision director, Fremont