

Kindergarten Complications



ILLUSTRATION BY MEGAN A. GEX

What the journey of transitioning from female to male means for a five-year-old in Silverton, and for those around him

BY MEGAN A. GEX ■

Editor's Note: Silverton native Megan A. Gex is a fourth-year magazine journalism and digital art major at the University of Oregon. Her mother, Susie, was Oliver's Kindergarten teacher and was intimately involved in his transition into grade school, as well as his gender identification process. Over the past two years, Gex and her mother have continued to be in contact with the family, and follow Oliver's progress. The family's last name has not been included to respect their privacy. Gex can be reached at megangex@gmail.com.

At first glance, Oliver is a healthy, jovial seven-year-old boy. In the schoolyard he's known for his gelled faux-hawk, and his favorite color is blue. His favorite book is *The Dangerous Book for Boys*. He loves to sprint the 200-meter in track and watch *Sponge Bob* on the weekends with his best friend. His rambunctious attitude and boyish tendencies belie a core reality: Oliver was born a girl.

With today's prenatal technology, gender identity is often established before birth. It's something parents take for granted, while picking masculine names or painting the child's room pink prior to delivery. During the first years of rearing, the parents often provide their offspring with a gender role, before the child is even aware of their sex. Between the ages of two and three, children start expressing their own gender tendencies, according to specialist B.J. Seymour. Most of the time the child identifies with their assigned sex, but other times their psyche may say something different.

Oliver, born Olivia in 2002, began showing signs of gender discomfort at one-and-a-half years. At such an early age, the signs weren't verbal; they were present in the choices he made. Over the next year his mother Holly swept her apprehension from the front of her mind and let her child play with whatever toy, or act whatever way, he pleased. "That's why I bought him Hot Wheels," Oliver's father Joel says. "I thought, 'Cool, my daughter likes cars.'" Both of them shrugged it off as just a "tomboy phase."

Holly, a hard-working nurse with strawberry-blonde curls, has a warm affection and deep admiration for Oliver and his struggle. Flipping through photographs of Oliver as a toddler nearly brings her to tears. "Right here he's three," she says, holding a photograph of a doe-eyed girl in a green t-shirt with purple hair clips. "I had such a struggle with him that day to get him to wear ponytails. That was the last picture we ever got to take of him like this, because he wasn't old enough to throw a fit."

She glances over baby photo after baby photo, creating a tentative timeline of Oliver's transition: one of him with a lace headband in a velvet dress, age one; another taken the following year, in jeans and galoshes with a mid-length haircut. "It's so strange looking at these pictures. It's the same soul, just a different person," Holly says.

NOT "JUST A PHASE"

Instinctively Holly could tell something was different about her child, but Joel came to notice the seriousness much later. One evening Joel and Oliver were wrestling, an activity the two thoroughly enjoy. Joel began to tease Oliver, insisting he was going to put him in a dress. "It was like I did something that really hurt him, something was really wrong," Joel shares. "That was when I realized that it wasn't just a phase."

From that moment there was a two-year transitional period of therapy, counseling and finally acknowledgment. Their first therapist instructed them to have Oliver remain gender-neutral for the first years, to test the waters. During this experimental period, his name changed to Olive. His wardrobe consisted of unassuming clothing, with unisex cartoons like Sesame Street and Teletubbies.

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