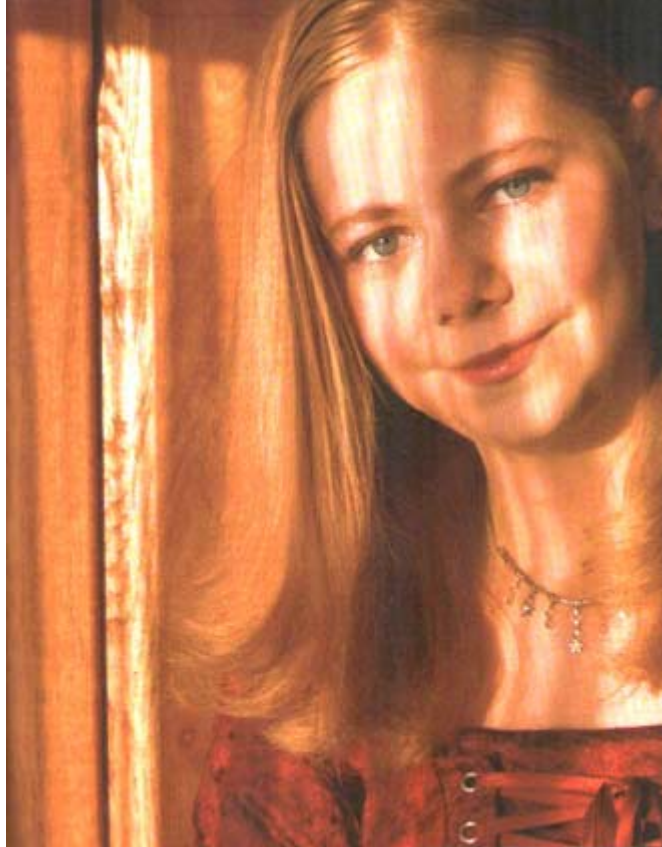


Neils Became Nicole

"Now I am able to be who I actually am"

Translated into English by Barbara Blake¹ and then copy-edited by Sonia John²

The original of this article, Neils werd Nicole³, was published in Dutch in November 2002 on the LGK T&T4 website.



Nicole Roukema is a girl of thirteen. Yet only two years she was a boy named Neils. He decided when still very young to change his gender. Together with his parents he decided to start living as a girl. Nicole feels herself a girl, and also goes out as a girl. But she will not be able to have her SRS operation until she is eighteen.

Early Years

"It was a relief for us all, two years ago, when we got the result of the psychological investigation of Neils by the University Medical Center', says Greet Roukema, the mother of Nicole, in the living room of their Frisian home. "It was finally clear. Niels was still young, but felt that he was a girl. The medical word for her feelings was gender dysphoria. Finally there was an acknowledgement that Neils should be a girl. We could now openly talk about it. Even my husband, who had always felt strongly that Neils was a boy, reacted with 'Okay, then if it is so, it is so'.

Even when Niels was still very young Greet already noticed that he was different from her other son. "He was a quiet, gentle, devoted child, and kept to himself. When he was three years old, he wanted to be like his older sister and wear her clothes and skirts." Despite the age difference - his sister is eight years older, they always played nicely with each other. As a toddler and at school he could always be found in the doll's

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⁴ <http://www.lkgtent.nl/>

corner! And for his fifth birthday he wanted nothing but a Barbie doll. "I never found it odd, or looked too deeply into it then. It seemed normal for Neils.

Investigation

When Niels was six he started talking about being a girl openly. He became anxious and began wetting himself at school and later at night in bed. His parents were concerned and took him to see a urologist. He did all sorts of investigations, but physically he could find nothing wrong. They tried changing everything around him to see if it would help, but the problems continued. When he was eight years old he had a psychological test, to see if there were other problems. The result was a complete surprise: "We feel that Niels would be happier as a girl." according to the psychologist of the investigation team. "We think that he is someone who may change sex and become a girl later, if he is allowed to follow his feelings.'

Girlish

Greet said "I was frightened to death at first. I did not know that such a thing existed or was possible with a male child. My husband found it very hard to accept. We said nothing to Niels at first. I began to observe him very closely. I thought that maybe it was true, and then again: 'No, it can't be!' During this period he always wanted to wear a skirt when he came home from school. As soon as he got home, he went and put on a skirt. When my husband came home, he would make Neils take the skirt off. He hated the fact that my son liked to wear a skirt. He told Niels not to wear a skirt again. But there were so many other things. I also tried to stop Neils from playing in such a girlish manner, and to change his attitude too. He was so girlish! What could I do about this?', I thought, and I became quite desperate. I struggled with it for two years, and I even dared to tell some of my good friends about it. They felt it was unusual behavior, but couldn't tell me how to deal with it. However they always listened to me and let me talk about it without censure."

Recognition

Recognition of the problem came when Greet saw a TV program about children with transsexual feelings. "It was a shock of recognition. The young boys on television were just like Neils and played happily with dolls and all sorts of girls' things. I realized then that I had to do something about it." Via the organization Berdache (a self help group for parents of gender dysphoric children in the Netherlands) she came into contact with Professor Cohen, a specialist in this area. Greet made an appointment to see her. But her doubts still remained : ' Was this right for Neils?'

Looking at Photos

We looked at photographs as Greet stood to serve the coffee. In came two girls together. It was Nicole and her sister Ciska (21). They sat down on the settee. Nicole had her long blond hair in a pony tail. She was dressed in jeans and a white sweater; a sports-loving girl of thirteen, with a small amount of eye shadow on. The photograph album was put on the table. "Look at it ", says Nicole, "these were taken when I was only four ". She showed us a photograph of a small young blonde. Ciska leafs through the photographs further. She begins to laugh. "And here is Nicole! When you married Mimi, the cuddly bear, and I performed the marriage as the civil registrar. And here... in your favorite blue skirt. My skirt!', she adds . Nicole' s face lit up at this: "That was such beautiful skirt, as I turned around it twirled around so wonderfully!"

Wanting To Skip Rope

Niels was ten years old when he and his parents had their first appointment with Professor Cohen. Greet told the professor that Niels had always behaved very girlishly and always played with girls' toys. Nicole: "For me was it quite normal. I never thought: I am different from other boys. I normally found it nicer to play with girls and play girls' games." At school, he spent all his time with the girls, and at break times he would skip rope with them. "Nobody found that odd or looked strangely upon it." Ciska: "I began to think about Niels. I knew a homosexual boy in my class. 'He, I thought, was rather like my brother, having a tenderness, a dear and gentle manner of behavior that was very different from most other boys."

Pieces of the puzzle!

Then there was an extended psychological investigation. Four times Niels and his parents returned to the University. The final results confirmed their suspicions. Greet: "Professor Cohen told us that although Niels was still very young, he himself felt that he was actually a girl and knew that he did not feel like other boys." His parents, like Niels, had started to see the pieces of the puzzle falling into place for them. Nicole: "Then

at last I began to understand completely. The bed wetting had happened because I myself did not feel right as a boy. At school, I became irritated quite quickly. I could not be the girl I wanted to be. It was awful as I think about it now. In the back of my head I had the idea: I cannot be myself. At home I could escape the name calling, and unpleasantness, and I found that it was not totally silly when I dressed myself as a girl, or when I played with Barbies on my bed. It was only at school that I felt that I had to restrain myself, so that other boys did not think me too odd, when I talked to the girls about girls' matters".

Partners in adversity!

After the results of the psychological examination became known things moved quite quickly. Nicole was then eleven. They went to a meeting of the Berdache organization. Greet: "When we got there, Neils' eyes almost popped out, because there were lots of other children like him." Ciska: "I was also with him and stood looking open mouthed. 'Oh yes', I thought, that girl is actually a boy and that boy is actually a girl. There was finally a name for Neils' situation - and only then I began to realize that there were many children like this and that it was not so unusual. During that day Niels played with other children, and made contact with others his age. The next day he was reluctant to go to school as a boy. But he did, and when he came home he told me that he was so sad that he had cried at school today. Then he said, "Yesterday (at the Berdache group) I could totally be myself for the first time".

The Awkward Bit!

Niels wanted to tell everyone at school how he felt, but was nervous about doing it. Greet spoke to the headmistress of the school personally. She suggested that it would be best to tell the parents of the children first so that they could tell their children at home sensibly. So during a parents' evening Neils' desire to become a girl was publicly mentioned. Greet tells the story: "After the announcement it was deathly quiet. I stood with my hands sweating. Then two parents began to clap: How brave of you to tell us this publicly' was their reaction. The next day someone else's mother brought me an apple cake. I never myself felt ashamed for Niels. I was only fearful of him not being understood and accepted. It is only me who really understands about him', I always thought. I didn't know whether people would just think this was none of their affair, or, on the other hand, whether they would think that a child's gender is clear at birth and should not be changed.

To clear the air about this she wrote a letter, which was printed in the church newsletter. This got very positive reactions. Greet: "Niels has sometimes played the saxophone during a youth service. Sometimes he pinned his hair up girlishly or wore a piece of jewelry. I always felt very uncomfortable about this. I could feel the men all thinking: what mother would let her son look so girlish and feminine! Now that they knew about him, and that it was not just a silly whim, I felt so much better."

From Neils To Nicole

The children in the class also reacted positively when Neils told everyone that he was really a girl. He had lots of questions from his classmates. Some had suspected something all along. Now it is fully accepted. Immediately after that, Neils rushed out to buy the first girls' clothes of his own. Nicole: "It was a waistcoat and a short sweater dress adorned with flowers." He also started to grow his hair and chose a girl's name: Nicole. "It was hard to remember to use her new name at first", says Greet, "it felt so strange." I once called her: "Hé, Nicolleke", for a joke. My husband often made mistakes. Soon after this, I decided that it was time for all the church to see the new 'Nicole' During the summer holiday we planned to spend two weeks staying in a friend's house. There she could finally be Nicole, a real girl. "This is me" she said! She got a lot of admiration and compliments on her feminine appearance and behavior!



Treatment!

Nicole now takes medicine to stop any male puberty, which her body had not yet started. This will prevent any beard growth and also keep her voice from breaking. There are advantages in delaying SRS until later, although Nicole definitely wants to have her SRS operation as soon as she can. Greet: "When I gave her her first tablet, I still wondered 'Are we are doing the right thing for her?' But we have thought it over long and hard. On a given moment you must make a choice. Until the operation the process is reversible, and they can consequently restore a male Niels, if that is what he wants. At the moment Nicole is very fortunate in her new social role." After these words are spoken, Nicole looks at her mother with a mixture of pride and love. Ciska breaks the intimate silence: "I have never thought: ' Don't do it.' You don't stick your neck out like this and then want to change back again, otherwise you undermine yourself. I have great admiration for Nicole. I have watched the whole process that she has gone through so far. Not that I myself feel the need to change my gender. However, I realize that in many other respects I can become who I want to be. I do not need to consider other people's views and opinions. Nicole should be able to be the same."

Teasing

Despite initial acceptance of her change by her classmates, abuse and teasing are still a continuing phenomenon in Nicole's life. Mostly the problem is with children from other classes who do not know the full story, or have listened to other 'tales'. They sometimes call her names like 'Transvestite. Now she goes to secondary school, and the story soon went around 'We have a transvestite in school!' Greet has the sent the parents a letter, but sometimes there are still incidents. "Recently during break at school, two girls came and sat next to me", Nicole recalls. "That girl next to me is a really a boy", said one girl to the other, so that I could hear. It is unpleasant that I always have to justify myself being a girl. Mostly she copes with the abuse very well. She has a few good girlfriends, with whom she shares everything. "They always treat me as a girl and never think otherwise".

Nicole's Bedroom

On the door of Nicole's room is displayed a mosaic with her name; it was made by her. "I also have one somewhere with Niels on it", she says. She shows us the other plaque and then puts it away again; it is something from her past, not the present. Her room is full of cuddly toys and especially Barbies. "Well I have at least thirty" she says. A black Barbie, a ballerina, even a pregnant Barbie. "Look, as you take the child out of the belly it goes flat".



Impatience and Frustration!

Nicole thinks like a girl even though physically she is still a boy. "I find it quite boring that I have a penis", she says. "I am still in the wrong skin." When she is sixteen she will be able to start hormone treatment and then her breasts will develop. When she is eighteen she will have her operation to remove her penis and create a vagina. That is still five years away. "I find the thought of them cutting me open to make it, quite scary, but the other half of me can't make the five years go fast enough. I get desperate sometimes because it is such a long time to wait! In the meantime I must postpone everything. I fell in love with a boy, but when he found that I still had a penis, he wanted nothing more to do with me. I can understand why the boy might find this repulsive, but it hurt me a great deal. Then the only thing I could do was to go and talk to my friends and have a good cry".

One day I will be a woman!

Once again animated, Nicole says: "I already wear a bra. It has white lace edging around the cups. "First I filled it with padding, but now I have silicone gel pads that are more realistic and give me a nice bust. Nicole has a dream: "That one day I will be a complete woman and have a family. I know that I cannot have children naturally, but I want to adopt children. I also want to be a famous actress one day."

"What will I do when I am eighteen, and am a complete woman?

I will have a large celebration and..... fall in love! "

Following are some additional pictures of Nicole, which were not part of the original article.



Nicole appearing on a Dutch TV program about young transsexuals



**The original of the above article, Neils werd Nicole⁵, was published in Dutch in November 2002, in the gender dysphoria information website "Landelijke Kontaktgroep T&T (LKG T&T)⁶", with the source being "Friend number 48, through Gijbers". The article was translated into English by Barbara Blake⁷, and then copy-edited by Sonia John⁸. Barbara herself has a transgendered teenage daughter, and is happy to discuss any of the issues raised.*

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*See also the following articles translated from Dutch into English by Barbara Blake:
NICOLE'S SPEECH TO HER CLASS: "Mummy, I want to become a girl!"⁹
Wrong Body... They have that 'pecker'¹⁰*

NICOLE'S SPEECH TO HER CLASS

"Mummy, I want to become a girl!"

Nicole Roukema (13) was a principal guest on a TV program about gender dysphoric children. She decided to tell her class at school about herself and explain what gender dysphoria meant. Here is the text of her talk:

Gender dysphoria. What is Gender dysphoria? Gender dysphoric boys feel that they are girls and behave as girls. And the other way around, girls who feel they are really boys.

I am that kind of boy!

I play with Barbies and other girl's toys, and I wear jewelry. Even when I was only three years old, I already knew that I did not want to be a boy; I pinned up my short hair and wore rings and bracelets and put on skirts. I loved to play with my sister and her Barbies.

Usually boys hate playing with Barbies, but love to play with toy soldiers or with lego-cowboys. I also have lego, but it is lego-witches and princesses. Also I love to play with girls and if not, to be on my own. Boys love to play a sport such as football, but I don't need to tell you about that!

Whenever I went to school on my birthday, I had to tell everyone what presents I had been given. Usually I got something I could tell them about, like a book or a game. But one time I only had a Barbie and I dared not tell about that!. Also, I was often mistaken for a girl because I had such a high voice, but they knew nothing further. And now I am able to behave as a girl completely, and not have to pretend that I am someone else!

We saw a television program about a boy who dressed as a girl and played with Barbies. That was when we first began to understand what it was! Consequently when my parents saw this boy Willem on TV, they came to understand the term 'gender dysphoric', and that this was what I had too! My mother wrote a letter to the NCRV, and they gave her the phone number of the self-help group for parents of gender dysphoric children. Then my mother took me to see Professor Cohen in Utrecht, for evaluation and advice. Professor Cohen sent us questionnaires for my parents, my teacher and me to fill in.

I had to take all sorts of tests. First of all I had to sit in a room with two-way mirrors in it. From the other side you could see in without being seen. That was where Professor Cohen and her two assistants sat. There

⁵ <http://www.lkgtent.nl/aktueel/uit-de-media/uitdemedia-20021100-01.html>

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⁹ <http://ai.eecs.umich.edu/people/conway/TS/Netherlands/#anchor530273>

¹⁰ http://ai.eecs.umich.edu/people/conway/TS/Netherlands/Wrong_Body.html

were toys for a boy and a girl and dress up clothes (I only tried the fancy ones!) The assistants observed me closely as I played with the toys. Then I had to answer questions and complete puzzles, and had several conversations with Professor Cohen. The result was that I was 'gender dysphoric'.

I had to have blood tests; these are done for all children as they do not yet know why some children are like this and others not. The self-help group for parents is called 'Berdache', but what does this mean? It means third gender, not man, not woman, but in between. The word comes from native north and south-American cultures.

Last year, in May, there was a family day in Utrecht. The gender dysphoric children and their families met on a playground. That was the first time I met the others. Maikel said that he would introduce me. We went to the cottages where the other children were, so that I could meet and play with Guido, Valentijn and Jamie.

In the large building were men who had dyed hair and wore make-up. I also saw both Yvette and Jerke from the television program. That was a very lovely day. The next day, I decided that I should tell everyone at school about me.

Through the family day, I have a new friend: Jamie. I have written to him and phoned him. When I spoke to him he said that he would like to come and see me. My mother said that he could stay the night, and he came to visit. I am really glad that I have a friend who is just like me.

Footnote:

Before I spoke to the class, my teacher decided that first the parents of the other children should be told about me and they would tell their children. After that I could make my speech! I assumed that the children would not understand at first, because their parents didn't understand it at all and couldn't explain it properly.

After my speech to my class they sent me a card saying that they me will accept as I am!

Recently I was asked to speak to another group. I was quite nervous, and when I began, I could hear my voice tremble, but the nervousness soon went away.

Those still so many who do not know or understand and probably think that I am odd, or queer, when they see me wearing girl's clothes, earrings and nail varnish.

Greet and Nicole Roukema

(Greet is Nicole's mom)

Return to Lynn's TS-IIa page¹¹

Return to Lynn's homepage¹²

¹¹ <http://ai.eecs.umich.edu/people/conway/TS/TS-IIa.html>

¹² <http://www.lynnconway.com/>