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## See Tom Be Jane

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The country's youngest transgender child is ready for school. But is school ready for her?

by Julia Reischel



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It's a spring break morning, and by 11 a.m. at the Anderson home, chaos is erupting. School is out for the week, and the twin boys are throwing a ball inside the spacious, two-story house. Upstairs, the preteen daughter pretends not to hear her mother calling. Lauren Anderson, a tanned and well-dressed stay-at-home mom who seems incapable of sitting still, cajoles her offspring to behave as she waits for a babysitter to arrive. Her youngest, Nicole, five, is frowning. Nicole's face is framed with delicate brown braids, and her fingernails are painted a rainbow of colors. She plans to go swimming with a friend at the community pool, but at the moment, she doesn't like the way her dress feels. She yanks the hot-pink halter-top over her head, telling her mother, "This is poking me. I want to change my dress."

Minutes later, she scampers back, now as naked as a jaybird except for her underwear. Without the dress, you can clearly see her penis, tucked carefully into her pink patterned panties.

**Nicole has been insisting she's female since she could talk.**

photo: Colby Katz

Born a biological male whom the family named Nicholas, Nicole today dresses, acts, and lives like a girl. She's been insisting she's female since she could talk, say the Andersons, who asked that their real names not be used for this article.

"He has always been attracted to the flowers, the bright colors, his Barbie dolls, and his beloved mermaids," Lauren says, using the male pronoun for her child. In fact, talking with Lauren, who fully supports Nicole's desire to live as a girl, it's clear that the family is still working out the grammar of how to refer to its youngest.

"As a young toddler, he wouldn't let me snap her onesies together because she wanted to wear a 'dwess' like his sister," Lauren says, mixing pronouns like *he* and *her* interchangeably.

Lauren admits that the family is feeling its way down a path very few families find themselves navigating. Although it's common for young boys to play with dolls or paint their nails—what parents classically refer to as "a phase"—it's much rarer for a child to so completely identify as the opposite sex. And what to do about it has been the subject of fierce debate for decades.

Nine years ago, a Belgian film, *Ma Vie en Rose*, explored the most common reaction to a young boy's decision to live as a girl. In other words, the parents panicked. So did the rest of the neighborhood, who shunned and ridiculed the boy's family until they felt compelled to move away. In real life, meanwhile, another famous case in 2000 ended even worse. When Zachary Lipscomb's parents attempted to enroll him as a girl named Aurora in an Ohio school at age six, a state child protection agency took the child away.

Some therapists insist that such children should be discouraged from living as the opposite sex because, they have found, the large majority of such children grow out of it. Studies show that many end up as gay adults. But a growing coalition of therapists, scientists, and activists disagree and refer to such children—even those as young as three years old—as transgendered, insisting that the child's new identification shouldn't be discouraged.

The Andersons are in the latter camp, encouraging Nicholas to be Nicole. Experts consulted by this reporter say the Andersons are the only family in the United States supporting a five-year-old's choice to live as the opposite sex. This fall, the Andersons plan to enroll Nicole in a Broward County, Florida, kindergarten class as a female. They are convinced that's the only way she'll be happy.

That decision has rallied much support for the family's side. There's attorney Karen Doering of the National Center for Lesbian Rights, for example, who represented Michael Kantaras, a female-to-male transsexual, in a widely publicized 2004 victorious custody battle in the Florida Supreme Court. Kantaras, who won joint custody of his two children when the court ruled that his parental rights were not nullified by his sex change, was the first transsexual parent to win such a high-profile victory. Doering is advising the Andersons as they wait to hear from school officials, who so far have given no indication of how they plan to prepare for Nicole's enrollment.

And that's where Nicole's story veers even further from the ordinary. Because trying to pressure school officials to address the Andersons' concerns is a person who could be either a big help or a big distraction.

Mark Angelo Cummings, a man who once was a woman, has become something of a Spanish-language television talk-show phenomenon. Cummings's outspoken appearances, which have wowed Latino TV hosts with stories of his transformation, are leading to a new openness about transsexuality in the Latino community. And Cummings plans to use his celebrity, such as it is, to promote Nicole's cause.

This fall, whether it's ready or not, the Broward School District will make some sort of history. Thanks to a showboating transsexual guardian angel and the little boy who insists he's a girl.

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On a recent morning, it takes a lot of coaxing to tear Nicole away from watching *The Ten Commandments* to tell a reporter how she feels about being a "special girl."

"Do you know why you're a special girl?" her mother asks.

"Because... I have a girl brain in a boy body," Nicole says, lowering her usual penetrating voice to an almost inaudible sigh.

"What does that feel like? Does it feel good? Or is it hard?"

"Hard," Nicole says.

When her mother asks her if she's happy with the way she looks, she says no.

"What would you change about yourself?"

"Mm... my penis," Nicole murmurs.

"What would you do with it?" her mother asks.

"Um... cut it," Nicole replies, very softly.

"And what would you do with it then?" asks a surprised Lauren, who later says she's never before heard Nicole express dislike for her penis.

"I would hammer it," Nicole says.

"What?" Lauren says.

"Hammer it," Nicole insists more strongly.

Later, Lauren says she constantly feels as if she's flying by the seat of her pants. "There is no protocol,"

she says. "Nobody knows of anybody. No five-year-olds who go to school fully transitioned. There's no book called *How to Raise Your Gender Variant Preschooler*."

Nicole "carried like a girl" when Lauren was pregnant, but when Nicholas was born, he was definitely a baby boy.

"So we dressed him all boyish," Lauren says, as she fondly turns the pages of a fat baby album. There are pages and pages of little Nicholas—with his family smiling at his bris, dressed in a tiny football uniform, being hugged by his older siblings. Nicholas looks happy. But Lauren says his desire to be treated like a girl was constant.

"At first, I thought it was cute," she explains. "I don't have a problem putting nail polish on a little boy. I don't have a problem if my son plays with dolls. His older brothers went through a similar period of doll playing and asking for nail polish on their toes. There's no reason to say no to a phase. I never once said 'no.' A phase is a phase."

So baby Nicholas was allowed to wear high heels. To play with *Little Mermaid* and Barbie dolls. To grow his hair a little longer. But instead of being satisfied with these concessions, Nicholas always asked for more. One day, he asked for something his parents weren't expecting.

Lauren was sitting at her computer working when two-year-old Nicholas, who, like all the Anderson children, had a frank understanding of anatomy, came to her with a request: "I want the fairy princess to come and make my penis into a vagina," he said.

Lauren mentioned Nicholas' strange demand to his pediatrician at the child's three-year birthday checkup, expecting to be told that the behavior was part of the phase. "She got a concerned look on her face," she says. "This was not the reaction I was looking for." The Andersons were advised to look into Nicholas' desires with the help of a therapist.

Frightened, Lauren says she turned to her college copy of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) and looked up something called "Gender Identity Disorder," the clinical term for transsexualism. It seemed to describe Nicole's behaviors exactly.

The Andersons called Marcia Schultz, a psychologist in Coral Springs. One session with Nicholas, who was then three, convinced Schultz that he had a form of GID.

"Nicholas is a transsexual who wants to be a woman," Schultz says.

Through Schultz, the Andersons met Heather Wright, a jovial and frank male-to-female transsexual with a hearty handshake who lives in Green Acres with her female partner and their three children. They took Nicholas to see her. Wright immediately noticed that little Nicholas seemed uncomfortable in his body.

"He was definitely very quiet," Wright remembers. "He definitely wasn't happy with having to wear the clothes he was wearing. One of the things he was upset about was he wanted to wear girl clothes. All he got away with was getting *Little Mermaid* flip-flops."

After meeting with Schultz and Wright, the Andersons began allowing Nicholas to act and dress like a girl in the safety of their home or in the anonymity of the grocery store or at Disney World. That summer, Nicholas' camp even allowed him to wear a girl's bathing suit. But at preschool, Nicholas remained a boy and seemed satisfied with relegating his girl time to afterschool hours. Until he turned five.

"Right at the age of five, it was like 'boom,'" Lauren says. "Since he hit five, he totally rebelled and refused to wear boy clothes. Every single day was a fight. By the end of the school year, she looked like a totally different child."

Today, Nicole gets to be all girl at home and is supposed to be "neutral" in public at her preschool, where many of her friends, all girls, call her "she." But every day, Nicole chips away at the vestiges of her boyhood.

"I try to do the neutral thing, and it doesn't work," Lauren says, "Slowly, every day, a new article of

clothing will come out of the closet. And we end up looking like a girl."

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Nicole has settled on a gender, but there's little else that's settled when it comes to Gender Identity Disorder. Even the name itself—that a child like Nicole has a "disorder"—is contested.

Until 1973, homosexuality was listed in the DSM as a mental disorder; then it was removed after intense debate in the psychiatric community. And many transsexuals believe GID should have been tossed out at the same time. For some, however, GID continues to be a useful diagnosis that helps determine whether a person is a good candidate for sex reassignment surgery.

Politics about transsexualism permeates any discussion of GID. The only long-range scientific study conducted by psychologists, harshly criticized by transsexual activists, shows that many boys diagnosed with GID as children grow up to be gay males and that only a few continue to identify as female. Studies by endocrinologists, on the other hand, have uncovered some biological similarities in the brains of transsexuals, a finding that suggests that transgenderism is not something one can merely "grow out of."

All of which means that there's little anyone can agree on when it comes to treating five-year-old boys who want to be girls.

"There are three basic types of attitudes about this," says Heino F.L. Meyer-Bahlburg, director of the Program of Developmental Psychoendocrinology at the New York State Psychiatric Institute and a professor of psychiatry at Columbia University. "There are people who are strictly anti-trans kids who always try to modify the behavior. There are people who are strongly supportive, who from the outset would strongly encourage a transgender identity. Then there are the people sitting on the fence."

Kenneth Zucker, a psychologist who has treated hundreds of young Gender Identity Disorder children at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health at the University of Toronto, is a well-known proponent of modifying behavior. He advises that children with GID undergo therapy to work through their hatred of their bodies before being accepted as transsexuals. His clinical research shows that he has an 80 to 90 percent success rate of steering young GID children away from living as trans adults. Gay and transsexual groups are harshly critical of Zucker, saying that his work encourages religious-right organizations that seek to "cure" gays of their homosexuality. But Zucker himself has taken pains to separate himself and his work from those organizations.

Told of the Andersons and their plans to enroll Nicole in school as a girl, Zucker says he's concerned that the Andersons have been swayed by an activist transsexual agenda and are ignoring the possibility that Nicole might simply be a troubled child. "Let's see if there are ways to try and help this child work this through," he says. "Instead, they're going to cement this in more and more." He says that what the Andersons are doing could be considered "some type of emotional neglect."

Meyer-Bahlburg is more ambivalent. "Force doesn't really work very well. On the other hand, I don't feel clear about strong encouragement in the transgender direction, because the vast majority of kids fall out of it," he says. When he treats GID boys, he advises his patients to beef up boyish activities and play with carefully selected male playmates.

The Andersons, however, side with experts who consider children like Nicole transsexuals. Lauren attended the annual Philadelphia Trans-health Conference this January, where gender-variant children was a main topic and the subject of panels such as one titled "How Young Is Too Young?" Most parents at the conference seemed to agree that it's never too early to support a child as a transsexual,



**"Since he hit five, he totally rebelled and refused to wear boy clothes," says Nicole's mom. "Every single day was a fight. By the end of the school year, she looked like a totally different child."**

photo: Colby Katz

even at age five.

"I would never want to force any person to be something they're not," says Tom Anderson, Nicole's father. "This is different from 'It's time to stop drinking chocolate milk from a baba' or taking away a blanket. This is the essence of the person."

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Mark Angelo Cummings's transsexual essence is so overwhelming, he's had Maury Povich eating out of his hand.

"I even tried marrying a man," his introductory voice-over intoned, and the studio audience yelled "Ewwww!"

"I had my breasts removed."

Ughhhhh!

Then Cummings, a female-to-male transsexual from Hollywood, Florida, walked onto *The Maury Povich Show's* set with a swagger, wearing a jean jacket, a cowboy hat, and a generous crop of stubble.

Maury's first question cut to the chase: "What's going on below the belt," he asked in a jokey tone, wagging his finger in the direction of Mark's crotch. Without skipping a beat, Mark quipped back: "I could ask you what's going on below your belt."

Zing! The audience laughed, and then Mark really took control. He explained the biological basis of what he prefers to call "gender dysphoria." (As for the answer to Povich's question: Mark is still waiting to raise enough money for the genital surgery that would complete his transformation.) When Cummings's wife, Violet, joined him onstage, his statement that "love has no color or gender" was followed by raucous applause. At the end of the segment, the talk show host was breathless.

"Well, I'll tell ya, I've learned a lot," Maury said. "You're a great spokesman for this. I mean, this is quite remarkable."

He turned toward the audience: "I'm tellin' ya, I do this all the time, and I mean I'm sitting inches from this guy, and I'm looking for one little, just a fraction of Maritza, and I can't see a thing!"

"Well, Maury," said Mark, seeing his chance, "I want viewers to know that being transgender is not a sin, a crime, or a deviant behavior. What it is, is a birth defect. We are human beings with feelings, and all we ask is the respect... "

And as the audience began applauding, Mark plowed right through, standing and raising his voice:

"I stand before you all and plead: Please stop hating and start understanding. Open up your hearts and minds and realize that we are God's children too. Amen."

Following this performance, the Andersons contacted Cummings, and immediately, without even meeting Nicole, Cummings made her a central part of his mission. Nicole, he believes, should become a poster child for childhood transsexuality and should be protected at all costs from scientists like Zucker, whom he compares to Hitler.

A 42-year-old Cuban American who wears his mastectomy scars and thatching of springy black body hair as hard-won trophies of his true self, Cummings has made acceptance of South Florida's transsexuals a crusade.

And apparently, the bilingual man is just what Spanish television has been waiting for.

In the past four months, since the January Povich appearance, Cummings and his wife have appeared on six different local, national, and international Spanish-language television shows, including *Cristina*, the Spanish-language Oprah. Each time, he has delivered a pitch-perfect performance, patiently explaining the gender-bending qualities of environmental toxins on local call-in show *Quiéreme Descalzi* on America Teve and fielding embarrassing questions about his wife's sexuality from polished interviewers on *Sin Fronteras*, Telemundo's answer to *Dateline*. On each, he's preached his fevered pitch

for the "birth defect" that is transgenderism.

"They're all just grabbing for me," he says.

That's because Cummings may be the perfect spokesman to explain transsexualism to the Latino community, says Anagloria Mora, a Miami-based sexologist who specializes in Hispanic sex and gender issues. Mora appeared with Cummings on *Cada Día*, another Telemundo program, and featured him as a guest speaker in her Miami-Dade Community College class on human sexuality.

"Mark and Violeta spoke about his life, and he was very animated, very insightful," she says. "You can see he's not a freak, and you can empathize. It was the best workshop I've ever had, by far. My dream is to have Mark and me, side by side in a huge stadium full of Hispanics. To become public speakers throughout the nation to help Hispanic transsexuals."

After Cummings met the Andersons through the Internet, he launched the tactics that have worked so well on the Latino talk-show circuit at the Broward County School Superintendent's Office. He shot off two e-mails, exhorting Superintendent Frank Till to do everything necessary to accept Nicole as a girl, including allowing him to educate and train teachers and administrators himself.

The school system politely declined Cummings's offer. "They assured me that they are aware of how to treat disabilities of such a nature," he says. "But gender dysphoria? I doubt it."

Cummings keeps in close contact with the Andersons, advising Lauren to keep the heat on the school system. Impatient to create change, he has urged the family to help him advocate for transsexual issues and to make a documentary about Nicole. (It was Cummings who persuaded the Andersons to talk to a reporter.) They are grateful for his help but sometimes find him a bit overwhelming. "Mark is in a rush," Lauren says. "I just need to go at my own pace right now."

But Mark considers his work a matter of life and death. "Do you know how many people commit suicide that are transsexual because they just can't deal with it anymore?" he says. "If I could stop one life from being killed, then I've done my work."

Born in Havana in 1964, Maritza Perdomo was both severely cross-eyed and completely besotted with boys' toys, a double-whammy of challenges for her traditional Cuban family.

"I knew from the time I was three," Cummings says. "My relatives would all say, 'Oh, she's going to end up as a lesbian.' I was very butchy, very rough and tough, always had to have male things around. At five, I wanted to take my dress off."

Maritza's toilet training was especially problematic because she could never understand why she couldn't urinate standing up, like her father. She constantly ruined her frilly dresses with rough play. Every move was dominated by a controlling mother who refused to understand her desire to be a boy.

The teenaged Maritza fell in love with women and managed a full-blown addiction to crack cocaine while in the Army, a wild nightlife in the gay scene in Miami, and a slew of low-wage jobs. At 24, she made a last-ditch attempt to succeed at being a straight woman by marrying a 55-year-old Englishman in a frilly white ceremony. In the wedding video, a favorite prop on the talk shows, she looks young, lovely, and extremely nervous as she feeds cake into her new husband's mouth.

The marriage fell apart quickly, and Maritza quit crack cold turkey and then embarked on a series of lesbian relationships, including one woman with whom she planned to start a family. But Maritza, the one who would carry the baby, was never able to get pregnant, and eventually the partnership disintegrated.

At 38, Maritza met Violet, a straight woman who approached her at the gym. Nine months later, at their commitment ceremony in Key West, someone asked Maritza if she was "transitioning." The question was understandable—Maritza had discovered bodybuilding, and her once-chubby body was bulging with muscle and looked decidedly masculine, the classic appearance of a woman transitioning into a man. But Maritza didn't know that, because she had never heard of transsexuals.

"I get home and get on the Internet, and the tears went rolling down my cheeks, and the sky just like opened up," Mark says. "There are others like me. It was like a revelation."

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Maritza barreled through gender transition, going from the initial consultation with a therapist to hormone therapy to a full mastectomy to a legal name and sex change in just five months. "It was the easiest thing," he says. "I don't let grass grow under my feet. I was fulfilling my destiny. This is what I was supposed to be."

On February 6, 2004, Cummings and Violet were legally married as woman and newly minted man. Immediately, Cummings launched a campaign to help other transsexual men and women combat the gender dysphoria that he blames for so much of his life's pain.

If they would let him, Cummings would turn the Broward County Public Schools into one of his many projects, alongside his recently completed, self-published autobiography, *The Mirror Makes No Sense*; his plans for a documentary; and his greatest dream — a feature film about his life story. He says that he has been contacted by a filmmaker who has the ear of none other than Stephen Spielberg and that preliminary talks about the script are set for this summer.

Speaking of Nicole, though he has never met her, brings tears to Cummings' eyes.

"I was Nicholas at one point. I was five years old at one point. The best thing for Nicole would be to expose the whole thing," Mark says. "I don't think it will put him in danger. I think it will be a good thing."

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Even among transsexuals, not everyone thinks being raised as a girl will be good for Nicole. At one meeting of a transgender support group, Lauren encountered criticism from a female-to-male adult transsexual who thought Lauren's permissiveness was harming the child.

"He told me, 'I'm the man I am today because I suffered as a child,' " she says. "He was basically putting me down for accepting my child, saying, 'I think we all need to suffer because of this.'"

And at least one local adult who identifies as a gender variant and who requested that his name be withheld also has doubts.

"Nobody wants to be premature in definitively diagnosing anything," he says. "This isn't something that's reversible. Hormones can be started, hormones can be stopped, but they're not without their side effects. You're not going to get a whole school system to change overnight. There are no definites, not at such a young age."

Nicole will have no need for medical intervention for years—until puberty will begin to ruin her girlish figure. But eventually, she may consider taking hormone blockers to prevent masculinization and then eventually begin to take feminizing hormones. Or she could change her mind, prompting an awkward



**Nicole will have no need for medical intervention for years—until puberty will begin to ruin her girlish figure.**  
photo: Colby Katz

female-to-male transition. Either way, when these changes happen, she's likely to be the target of bullying.

Lauren says that rumors have already started at Nicole's school. "Some teachers were apparently milling around and talking about our family," she says. "One of them said, 'I heard she really wanted another daughter.' "

But Lauren says the potential for bullying won't change her mind. "I don't want to take that child's soul and squash it," she says. "The school doesn't have a choice. If the school says no, they're violating my child's rights. The plan B is not to switch schools or to homeschool. The plan B is to say 'no.' "

"We're the parents; we need to make a decision," Tom Anderson adds. "We see a child that's extremely happy, who loves and is loved by everybody. We're just going by our parental gut."

Logistically, the Andersons believe, having Nicole attend school as a girl shouldn't be difficult. Most of the classrooms at the school have attached single-stall bathrooms. With the cooperation of teachers, other children would never have to know.

Marilyn Volker, a Miami sexologist, says other transsexual children have successfully navigated Florida schools, often with the discreet help of teachers. "Sometimes only individual teachers know about it," she says. "Often, the teacher deals with it."

"This is a child with wonderfully supportive, loving parents who's got medical and mental health professionals on her side," lesbian rights attorney Karen Doering says. "I think as far as being able to handle bullying, I think this child will do just fine."

Although the Broward County School District would not acknowledge that it had received communications about Nicole's needs from the Andersons, it insists that it has protocols for dealing with a GID child.

"We take each child as an individual," district spokesman Andrew Feirstein says. "Any time a student enrolls in a district school and has specific needs, all appropriate information is gathered for an evaluation. District professionals meet together and work with parents to determine the student's best educational plan."

The Andersons say they contacted Nicole's principal in January, sending along two letters from mental health professionals who explained Nicole's special needs.

Then they waited. With registration for fall's kindergarten classes already beginning, the Andersons are still in the dark about the school's plans, making the task of listing Nicole's gender on the registration forms difficult. "I'm not going to put male or female. I'm going to put down 'I,' " Lauren says, which she means to stand for *intersexed*.

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Oblivious to the fight swirling around her as only a five-year-old can be, Nicole is headstrong and boisterous, with a room full of Barbie dolls and a fondness for singing showtunes to visitors. She seems to be a happy, healthy—and perhaps a tiny bit spoiled—little girl.

Male-to-female transsexual Heather Wright, who had first met Nicholas when he was only three, met Nicole for the first time six weeks ago, when the Andersons brought her to hear Wright speak at a local panel about transgender issues.

"It was a big difference," Wright says. "I couldn't believe her personality. I didn't recognize her at first. If I had not known, I would never have known. This time, she kept being the center of attention. She was very outgoing. Definitely able to function better. Now she seems to be Miss Personality, and very happy. Not the introverted person that I saw before."

A month ago, Nicole debuted in her first theatrical role in a local community musical. On the show's closing night, the stage is dark, and a chorus of small, childish voices lisp a showtune. Parading around the stage singing along and concentrating hard on her stage directions, Nicole is possible to pick out only because she is the youngest child in the show, a good head shorter than the other girls.

If anyone in the crowd or the cast knows that Nicole was once Nicholas, they don't seem to care—proof, the Andersons say, that Nicole will be able to function happily in public as a girl.

Nicole's 10-year-old sister, Angela, explains that for a while, having her younger brother turn into a younger sister was difficult.

"When I was younger, I thought that it was just a stage," she says. But now the most annoying part is that Nicole steals Angela's clothes. "But I guess that's what having a sister is like, because I've never had a sister."

As for Nicole's interactions with the outside world, Angela is used to answering questions.

"It's kind of strange," she says, "because my friends always call it a he, and I'm like, 'No, it's a she,' and it's kind of hard. Everyone always goes up to me and goes, 'That's a boy, right?' and I go, 'No, it's my sister,' and they go, 'Oh.' "

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