

A Sequel to Talks with College Students

By Tasi Zuriack

Several years ago, after reading about others experiences in presenting to college classes on cross-dressing and in listening to the ladies of Chi Epsilon Sigma talk about their experiences with Dr Kate Thomas's classes at Loyola, I wanted to try my hand at this particular form of outreach here in West Virginia. Now there is a very small population of acknowledged crossdressers in the Mountain State, and while we have several universities, WVU is by far the largest and it does draw many students from outside the state. So, after a little research, I wrote the head of the Psychology Department at WVU offering to present to his classes that dealt with gender orientation, and he in turn passed my letter to his staff.

Not long afterwards, I was contacted by Dr Nina Spadero, an adjunct professor, teaching classes on human sexuality. After several email exchanges, we agreed on a date that I would present to her freshman class. This was in September of 2008. I was also fortunate that one of Nina's colleagues, Dr Ed Jacobs, who teaches graduate level classes in Counseling, was also interested so I could talk with two of his classes as well.



I was excited about this opportunity, though I daresay; my wife was not, wanting to know why it was always me on the cutting edge. I have always been a risk taker so maybe this is my personality; nevertheless the chance to bring a touch of reality to students whose only knowledge of the transgender world was through textbooks was

for me too great to pass by. Now saying this, I learned through the experience that there is a significant difference in the level of maturity in students at the graduate and undergraduate level which is largely reflected in their questions. I'm glad to have experienced both.

I had prepared an overview with some statistics, some history on myself, an explanation of the transgender spectrum, and some personal anecdotes. My first presentations were to Dr Jacobs' graduate classes on a Monday evening and a Tuesday morning followed by a presentation on Tuesday afternoon to Dr Spadero's freshman class. I had also arranged to meet Dr Spadero and a colleague for dinner on Monday evening, also en femme. The venue for all of the classes was to incorporate my presentation into their course material for the day so I had about 30 minutes to speak and respond to questions. I kept my

comments generally about 15 minutes, but made sure the students knew I was not gay, was married with a tolerant wife, had children (they did not know), had served in the military (Vietnam vet), was a senior manager in my firm, and served on various Boards in my community; otherwise a regular guy. I just had this feminine side to my personality. I also talked about Tri-Ess and my chapter, Lambda Beta Rho, and most students were amazed to learn that we had a national organization. More than a few indicated that they would look at our website and for those going into counseling; it would become a valuable resource.

All of the classes were about 25 students with about a 70/30 mix of female to male students. None had ever met a crossdresser before and I am pleased to say that most perceptions were changed for the positive. Dr Jacobs said *“What a gift you gave to my students. Thanks so much. I know this will make a big difference in their tolerance for differences”* The students appreciated my honesty and a few commented on how courageous I was. Here are a few comments from the graduate students:

“Yesterday’s class was a very interesting experience for me. It was the first time that I had been given the opportunity to learn about the transgender population and it was great to have a speaker who was willing to be so open with the class and who was able to eliminate common misconceptions”and this one

“Tuesday’s class was very interesting. It was so new for me to hear from Tasi about her experiences. I really appreciated her openness to our class to discuss something that most people probably hide or not be willing to share with a bunch of strangers. More than anything, the topic that stood out the most to me was the idea of her wife knowing and being ok with it. I had to force myself to say “Tasi is a man and has kids and a wife” and “Tasi is a man but sometimes dresses as a woman, so what!?” In other words, I had to separate myself from the presented feminine image and realize that Tasi is just a person. Overall, it really helped me to open my view of different lifestyles.

I was going to take pictures but was so overwhelmed with other activities that I forgot until the last minute. I did remember as we departed the last class and had a picture taken of Nina and me, but alas, it didn’t turn out. Now interesting, as we walked out of the building onto the grounds of the university, one of her acquaintances approached us and asked to take our picture together. I found out later that he read me and said he wanted a picture of that man in a dress. So much for blending in.

Well, this but whetted my appetite for more outreach so when Dr Spadero contacted me again in March this year with an email heading of “I Am in Need”, I was quick to respond. She had several male students struggling with gender issues in this traditionally strong West Virginia male culture. This time I arranged to meet the good doctor and her husband for dinner the night before, but en homme. Several students had commented the previous year on their desire to see me as both a man and a woman and I felt Nina would find it interesting to meet the male side of Tasi. To make it even more interesting, I invited Christina, the newest member of Lambda Beta Rho who was also a grad student at WVU. We joined up with the Spadero’s about 7pm and enjoyed a leisurely dinner and conversation at an Indian restaurant in the Morgantown area. I was hoping that Nina would say that I was just a typical guy, but surprising to me, she said I had several natural feminine mannerisms and that I seemed more at ease when presenting as Tasi. I guess

this just reinforces the results of those pop quizzes you can take on whether you are feminine or masculine, and in which I consistently score as 70/30 female to male.

This leads into Nina's classes the next day. Christina joined me for the first class but as a student observer and the students were unaware of her feminine nature. Dr Spadero typically presents her class material for the first half of the class and then introduces me and the subject of crossdressing. The year before the class was talking about paraphilias, but this year the lead-in was most appropriate. Each student was asked on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being feminine and 5 being masculine, how they saw themselves. Many of their responses related to the daily activities, most particularly sports and while some students identified themselves as very masculine or very feminine, more often than not, the students tended towards the center, either 2, 3, or 4, even the men.

The second class was even more amusing as they got on the subject of how men and women walk (what could be more appropriate for a crossdresser). Try as she did, one young lady's repeated attempts to swagger as a man were unsuccessful.

It all made for a good laugh. So of course I demonstrated the differences with some exaggeration – more laughs. While some of the students still think of crossdressing as a hobby or a lifestyle change, more of them are being to realize that our gender is indeed fluid and we choose to express it in many different ways. Although it is a theory, it has been said that the expression of gender is a social construct, while gender identity is something that is hard wired into a person's brain. We are born with our identity and cannot change. There's no doubt that the students perceptions of gender identity changed that day and as for me, like others, this effort to educate our young people is a worthwhile commitment. Eel learn as much from them as they do from us. Christina will tell you that her acceptance as a crossdresser in the collegiate community is broad. This all bodes well for our acceptance in future generations.

The evidence is best told in their own words; however, so below are selected comments as they related them in emails to Dr Spadero after the classes.

This class has opened my eyes to a lot of things, but I think this was the most eye opening experience yet. I greatly appreciated the chance to get to know Tazi to hear about her experiences and her life F

I have to agree with everyone else in saying that I do not fully understand cross-dressing. But from what Tazi said it seems even cross dressers don't fully understand why they have the urge to dress in women's clothing. Although I do not fully understand it, I do accept it. The only thing though is I would want my husband/boyfriend to be up front about it with me. I'd rather find out from him as opposed to other people (or his drawers) and then figure things out from there F

The question of what it "feels" like to be masculine or feminine is still lingering in my mind. I keep thinking of what I do when I feel that I am acting more masculine or feminine, and then I realize the only reason I think its masculine or feminine is because of the image that has been placed is portrayed within society. So, my new answer to that question, given my new found thoughts, is that I am neither masculine nor feminine; I am just me all the time. (Though I can acknowledge what it is I am doing when I think of myself as being more masculine or feminine by societal standards)

As for cross-dressing, I'm not sure if I completely get it. I have no problem understanding transgender; to me, that makes perfect sense. However, I'm having a hard time wrapping my mind around wanting to feel extremely masculine at one point and then extremely feminine at another (though I've already stated that I can't give a definition of what either of those entails). The only thought that keeps running through my mind is, "If you're happy being your gender (according to body parts) then why is it not possible to act more feminine or masculine but not have to physically transform. I hate that I don't understand it, because I hate thinking of myself as not being open to everything.

With that being said, though I do not completely understand it, I accept that some people feel a physical need to cross-dress, and I would never judge them for such. **M**

I found today's class to be very interesting. I guess it never really occurred to me that male dressed up as a woman, would have no sexual interest whatsoever in men. And innocently, it did not occur to me that a male cross-dresser would be married with children. I guess I just usually assumed that cross-dressers were not married and did not have kids because they were trying to "find themselves". **M**

As if gender wasn't already hard enough to define, after Tazi spoke to us about her experience, it made the lines even more indistinguishable. When it comes down to it, your gender is definitely not just what you do but how you feel. I definitely enjoyed this class! **F**

I think it was quite a learning experience for us to have Tazi visit our class. I never knew how empowering it was for cross-dressers to take on a different persona. Tazi really gave us a glimpse into what it means to be a cross-dresser - not just looking like a woman, but feeling and acting like one, too. **M**

I think it's really great that Tazi was able to come to terms with her gender, and find a way to healthily express it. She is a great spokeswoman for her community **M**

I was very intrigued by today's class. I've never actually interacted with a cross-dresser before, and Tazi's views on the fluidity of the masculine and feminine were completely new to me **F**

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Here are some comments from the earlier class. This class did not know that a crossdresser was presenting. I just walked in and sat next to the professor until my time to speak. I spoke conversationally with Nina and the young lady next to me. I started my presentation with the question, "how many of you think that I am a woman?" A giveaway question, but about 1/3 of the class raised their hand.

Oh yeah, and I didn't really understand what Mrs. Doubtfire wanted to accomplish by dressing up like a woman. He/she/it said he/she/it wanted to be accepted by women as "one of them." Then why not just act like a gay dude that will get your desired results. Okay, I am with Patrick on this one. I'm just so confused how you can dress up like a woman but not have feelings for a man. I'm trying to keep my critical parent under control, but how can you want to be completely like a woman and not be attracted to men? I'm glad he came to talk to us today because it got me thinking. Oh, and the name tag game was awesome

I was shocked to learn that so many crossdressers are heterosexual and that their wives often know. I was not aware of the crossdressing culture and I guess that my knowledge was based on stereotypes

As for class, I think it was great that the speaker was so honest about his personal life when his family doesn't even know about it. I do believe that it is biological, but I don't understand their thought process on dressing female only part of the time. I also would have a very difficult time coping with my husband cross dressing. I don't think I could support that in any way.

I agree with Patrick, I didn't really understand why he didn't want to be 100% female. I mean if he is going to copy a female's mannerisms, shouldn't he also be attracted to the sex that most females are attracted to? I do remember Debbie saying something about more m-f transsexuals end up being lesbian, so is that what our guest was today?

This class was more critical or less understanding of crossdressers than the other classes and I would have liked more time to address some of the issues raised by the students. My later presentations did address some of their perceptions more clearly. The experience was nonetheless exhilarating.

In the April presentation, we had about four hours between classes. Dr Spadero, Christina and I, and several students adjourned to the local coffeehouse for some further discussion. I then spent several hours in the local Barnes & Nobles browsing the books and having lunch at an attached bistro. I seemed to blend in well here despite being a somewhat elderly woman. at least there were no unusual stares.

As I ponder the future, I do so with the feeling that our young people will be much more accepting of diversity. And I certainly encourage our ladies to expand their horizons if they ever have the opportunity to speak with those outside our transgender community