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Feature



From Sandy City Councilman to Transgender Activist

Jennifer Lee Jackson Celebrates Transgender Awareness Month by Telling Her Success Story

by Joel Shoemaker
joel@slmetro.com

Many people may know Ken Prince as a three-term member of the Sandy City Council in the 1980s and 1990s. Or they know his name as a Sandy mayoral candidate, where in 1993 he lost to Mayor Tom Dolan by only 207 votes. But the father of six children who married twice, served an LDS mission and later served in the LDS church leadership, struggled all his life with internal feelings that conflicted with his outward body appearance. On the inside, he felt he was a woman.

In her first interview talking openly about her past political life, Jennifer Lee Jackson (or Jenni, as she likes to be called) tells *Salt Lake Metro* that while much of her life may have been mixed with the pain of not feeling complete, she now considers herself a success. Back into politics as a board member of the advocacy group Equality Utah, Jenni is joining others concerned about gender issues for a meeting at the Gay Lesbian Bisexual Transgender Community Center of Utah on Oct. 27. The meeting is an effort to help organize a gender advocacy group that will act as a contact point for people in Utah interested in transgender issues. As someone who says she's faced considerable discrimination for being transgender, Jenni shares her story to help open up the dialogue in the community.

METRO: In your life were there pivotal moments where you realized you had to go through the change—maybe a pinnacle moment that capsulizes the feelings that you had?

JENNI: Oh, there are many moments ... When I was six, I totally thought for all those years I was a little girl. I played with little girls, I didn't go to school yet at that time, but I dressed up as a girl. My mom didn't seem to care; I mostly got the clothes from other girls out playing with them. But I was quite young. And then one night—my father was an alcoholic, and his way of expression wasn't always the best way—he didn't like my expressing as a female. So one night he did tell me through a major beating that if I did this again and shamed him that I could look forward to more beatings. So it was my choice, [but] he wasn't going to have a fag for a little boy. I tried all my life, especially when I was in high school. I was a football player, I did track, I dated, I was in many school plays, and I went on an LDS mission. But it was at that

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time when I was almost done with my mission that I started to feel these strong urges that said I wasn't who I was supposed to be. I had these emotions, these feelings, even body feelings, that were not what you call masculine. And so I fought those feelings all that time. When I came back from the mission, the church leaders told me that I just needed to get married. That was the fix-it-all. If you're gay or transgender, that would fix it ... So, you ask me, how many times in my life? Oh, all my life. There are so many times where it caused heartache in my marriages, with my children. I was a city councilman, I was a LDS church leader, I mean, I really, really tried. I spent so many years on my knees just praying to God to let me have peace.

METRO: When did you go through the change?

JENNI: When did I go through the sex change? We call it S.R.S., Sexual Reassignment Surgery. I was 52. It was just last year.

METRO: And you consider yourself a success story, right? There have been some people who have gone through the operation and it hasn't been everything they hoped for. So why is your life now so successful and happy?

JENNI: I really believe it's because I'm congruent now. I've lived almost two years now as a female. One of the things we try to do as transsexuals is live life as the other sex before we make that sudden shift with surgery. During that time there are hormones and a lot of therapy, so there's a doctor and a therapist working together to make sure you're a good candidate. I think a lot of us are very successful. But then a lot of us drift, we try to blend, out of fear mostly. One of our biggest fears is to be put in the same group as being gay or lesbian. And I've got to tell you, as a transgender person, that's a big, broad umbrella. There's a transvestite, a cross-dresser, there's an inter-sex child who has ambiguous genitalia.

METRO: So for you, the success is, "I found myself."

JENNI: I did find myself, but you know it came with a price. My brother to this day will not talk to me. My parents did talk to me before they died, they welcomed me as their daughter, and a lot of my relatives accept me, a lot of friends. But I was excommunicated from the Mormon Church because they do not understand. To that I say, What about the inter-sex child? What about those who don't have what it takes to be one or the other as far as outward appearance? What about the poor people who are born without arms or legs? There is a reason why nature does the things it does. It's wonderful, the diversity. And if we can get over that ruling that you have to be a certain sex, it's like saying everyone has to have red hair and blue eyes. That's not what it's supposed to be.

METRO: You mentioned before this "broad umbrella." The current politically-correct catchphrase is "GLBT." But the "T," should that be part of the gay and lesbian movement or are those issues unique on their own. Is GLBT too broad a term for people outside our community to understand? What's the best way to go forward with transgender issues?

JENNI: Excellent question. GLBT almost sounds like a sandwich doesn't it? The T is really symbolic, but what it does allow is for transgender people to come into a safe environment. The gay, lesbian and bisexual community has been through such a struggle that today it's more appropriate to be gay or lesbian than it would be to be transgender. Yes, they do provide a safe environment. I can go over to the GLBT Center and there is no animosity, the feeling is welcome. The only problem is that sexual orientation is far from that of gender identity. And so just recently, many of us in the transgender community have realized we can't just blend. Somebody has to be vocal enough and say, "This is what it's all about—love us or leave us but try and understand us. Being transgender is just another way of expression in life." That is why we're having this meeting at The Center.

METRO: Would you rather be identified as transgender or female?

JENNI: You know, I'd rather be recognized as female, because that's what my brain has always said. But for a short time, the next five to ten years, whatever it takes, I would just as well be identified as transgender. Because I want them to see I am as normal as they are, the only difference is I had to pay a lot of money to get there.

The meeting to start the Gender Advocacy Board will be at The Center on Thursday, October 27 at 6:30pm. For more information, contact Jennifer Lee Jackson at jenniferlee252@comcast.net.