

Why Barry Davies wants to be a man...

Born Sandra Griffith, Barry Davies now lives like a man, looks and dresses like a man and has a girlfriend. Here he tells Alison Macdonald of his struggle to live in the only way he feels he can—as a male

Barry Davies has a neat moustache as black as his eyelashes and short, thick hair. His five-foot-six frame, made modestly muscular by regular weight-training, fills out his casual sweatshirt and jeans.

Just under his collar-line is a tattoo of his birth-sign, with another on his arm bearing the name of a former girlfriend. For two years he's been living with a pleasant, 22-year-old girl called Carol.

Together they're buying the terraced house which Barry has spent months sprucing up.

To meet 25-year-old Barry is to think "This is a nice, ordinary young man"—not noticeably different from any other in the small Welsh steel working town where he lives.

Barry, relaxing at home, takes a deep breath before explaining why he is different, and the words come out in the passionate rush of someone who has been too used to bottling it all up.

"It's taken me all my life to express what I feel and am. When I was a child I'd go to bed—it sounds crazy now, doesn't it?—and pray to God when I woke up I'd have become what I really am.

"I didn't understand fully what was happening. All I knew was that there was a total conflict between my mind and body."

The name on Barry's birth certificate is Sandra Griffith. You could call him—and it's impossible to think of him as a her—a transsexual, Barry explains, and his sincerity is undeniable, that he's always known he was male, despite the body he was born with. He's spent all his adult life fighting to change that body, and way of life, to the one he feels is really his—male.

His relationship with girlfriends has been complicated, and that with his parents—loving but long uncomprehending—only recently healed. He's had 10 years of medical

treatment. Most frustrating of all, he says, are the everyday functions everyone else takes for granted.

"It's going swimming and having to worry about the changing-room. Going to the toilet and having to sneak into a cubicle. Thinking about jobs where you need a medical. And above all living with something you can't accept belongs to you."

The words pour out in an emphatic stream while Carol, small and brown haired, looks on understandingly. She's known from the start, and discussed it often.

"It's a disability," her boyfriend continues. "But it's not a recognizable disability, so people don't realize what a problem it is.

"I consider myself to be normal with normal feelings and needs like anyone else, but society doesn't—that's wrong."

It's because of this public attitude that Barry—not his real name—says he wants to tell his tale and, later, write a book.

It's been said there's only one female-to-male transsexual for every 107,000 people. That's about a third of the number of male-to-female transsexuals, including journalist Jan Morris, model Tula and American Nancy Hunt, all of whom have written autobiographies.

And Barry, born to a civil servant mum and steelworker dad, is all too aware he's in a minority.

As far back as he can remember, he says, there was a sense of not quite fitting in—"a really deep sense of loneliness," he calls it.

Some transsexuals, say doctors, rearrange their past to exaggerate claims to the gender they want. This is not so with him, insists Barry.

"When I was younger I didn't have much choice in clothes, and when at one school I had to wear a skirt I looked and felt stupid, angry that I had to wear it. I always had hairy legs and a lumpy build—my sister would walk past me in the playground and pretend she was my

cousin. I've always been masculine-looking apart from—you know—the private parts. But then," he adds surprisingly, "they don't belong to me anyway."

It doesn't take long to realize the distaste Barry feels for what remains of his once female body.

At 11 he had his first crush on a girl, natural as breathing to him and breathtakingly unnatural to his parents when they found the pair's love-letters under the carpet.

"There was a terrible atmosphere in the house," he says, smiling with the dry humour that's probably sustained him. "I was packed off to my cousin's for two weeks and after that it was all hushed up."

Barry was on the brink of a troubled adolescence. He failed the 11-plus, began shoplifting, was expelled from school for pinching a bike and, by his late teens, was in a women's prison for a violent crime.

He can't say whether his "disability" underlay this behaviour—which, it must be said, is no more typical of transsexuals than anyone else.

"Maybe," he says frankly. "Or maybe I was just a little tearaway. At any rate, I didn't bring much joy to my parents."

Barry began his 18-month stretch in Styal prison, Cheshire, with a moustache and deepening voice, thanks to the hormone treatment he'd had since, at 15, he'd sought help from his GP and was referred to a psychiatrist. To all appearances, he was a man among hundreds of women.

"It wasn't all bad," he says cheekily. "But some of the warders resented me. They told me to shave off my moustache, but I told them: 'I've waited too

long for this! They insisted on calling me by the name on my birth certificate and they tried to replace my Y-fronts with women's panties."

He's used to opposition, but in another age, another land, he might have had a smoother ride.

Jan Morris, travelling in Africa, writes of the reverence, rather than repulsion, with which she was greeted. Jan it was who probably provided the best-ever description of transsexualism when she entitled her book *Conundrum*—a real puzzle.

The medical profession is still uncertain as to causes and definitions. Hormonal malfunction in the mother's womb might predispose children to transsexualism, suggest some doctors. Does something go wrong during early childhood rearing when notions of gender are formed, others wonder? Or a combination of these...?

Physical tests don't provide an answer, yet many doctors are unhappy about describing it as a mental disorder. "I prefer to think of it as a psychological problem," says Dr Russell Reid of the psychiatric department of Charing Cross Hospital in West London, which sees some 200 transsexual patients a year. What is known about transsexuals is their complete resistance to attempts to "cure" them, and their steadfast determination to achieve the desired physical gender.

Psychotherapist Bridget Lee Nicoll, whose work for the Albany Trust self-help group includes

counselling transsexuals, says: "Once patients have opted for biological change it becomes an irresistible urge."

Her work has made her well aware of the cruelty that this minority group can suffer: "Unfortunately, there's a whole confusion in the public mind about transsexuals, homosexuals, transvestites... They tend to all get written off as queers, perverts or psychotics."

She urges her clients to develop compensatory social skills—intellectual, emotional or professional—rather than rush headlong towards the operating theatre.

Barry says he can hardly wait for complete surgery. His string of operations began while he was living with Patricia, his former girlfriend of eight years, whom he met before his spell in prison. Her emotional support, he says, was crucial: "If it wasn't for her I might not be here

Barry (once Sandra) and girlfriend Carol: to her he is no different from anyone else

now. She was the first person to truly accept me as me."

He was 21 when, with her backing, he had two operations in London. All transsexuals are rigorously screened by psychiatrists before they're considered for surgery; breast construction and vaginoplasty in the case of male-to-females, mastectomy and hysterectomy for female-to-males. Thorough diagnostic interviews are followed by a "real-life test" during which the patient lives in his or her new gender for about two years.

"Patricia had been making elastic bandages to hold what there was of my chest in," says Barry. "So it was an incredible, overwhelming relief to have the surgery. It's not because of sex, although that's all people seem to be interested in. Yes, of course sex is important, but not foremost.

"Of course I have sex with girlfriends. I make love to them. I do get feeling from it, and I feel like a man with a woman, except that it's not as if I—well, had all the parts!

"As close as I've been to girlfriends, no one has ever seen me without my shorts on. I'd feel too embarrassed. The point of surgery is to get rid of the body that

doesn't belong to you, that can make you depressed and self-destructive. At times I've felt like getting a knife and severing my head from my body. Yet I know that my mind and body are part of each other, and I don't want to die!"

Four years after that initial surgery, Barry's life seems to have taken a happier turn. He's got Carol, he's planning to set up a workshop with fellow-students when he leaves art college and he's friends with his parents. "They're 100 per cent behind me now. We used to have rows. My mum called me a freak. But I told Dad, 'I'm a guy, just like you, except that nature didn't complete the job.' And he said, 'We're not stupid. We knew for years there was something wrong.'"

Carol, who was a shop assistant when she met Barry two years ago, is an obvious source of strength. She was introduced to him by a mutual friend who soon broke the news that Barry was a transsexual.

"It was getting serious," says Barry. "And I wanted it to come from someone else because I wasn't sure she would understand."

Carol recalls: "I got quite upset at the time. I thought I was going to be told something awful, that he was married or something!

"I suppose I'm a broadminded person, like my friends. They know about it, too. I thought at first that some night snigger, but they didn't."

"My family like him. My parents are very understanding and my sister asked me when we're getting married. But I'm happy the way I am. I think we'll stay together, if it goes on like this. To me, he's just the same as anyone else."

If Barry has a regret, it's for the child he's left behind. When Patricia took the initiative of

becoming pregnant by a friend, it was at first a shock to Barry.

"We desperately wanted a child, but of course I couldn't father one and we knew we wouldn't be considered a stable enough background for adoption. She did it for me, but I couldn't help feeling inadequate.

"But soon I couldn't have loved him more if he was my own.

"And the baby forced me to straighten out my life. He's seven now, and of course I miss him."

Carol adds: "If ever we thought of having a baby, we might have to use artificial insemination."

His happiness, says Barry, would be complete if he could have surgery to make him wholly male. But it's not that straightforward...

Gender reassignment surgery, as it's called, for male-to-female transsexuals, has made great strides in the last 30 years. It's even available on the National Health. But phalloplasty—creating an artificial penis—is in its infancy.

A handful of the complex and costly operations have been done in this country. Typically, a surgeon may peel skin down from the

"One thing I'm sure of—love is love no matter who you feel it for or what type of love it is"

abdomen to create a non-erectile organ that might be used with a prosthesis. It's been found

very difficult to redirect urination through the cosmetic penis.

Doctors, understandably, have deep reservations about directing patients towards a less-than-perfect piece of surgery. Patients, understandably, become impatient.

"They've let me come so far," complains Barry. "Why can't they let me go all the way? If someone offered me an operation with a 50 per cent chance of success, I'd take it. That's how important it is to me. I'm tired of feeling I'm hiding something. I need to be completely, physically the way I am—a man."

However advanced the surgery that Barry might one day undergo, many aspects of his life will remain tied to his female birth certificate. He can't marry a woman in this country, he's eligible for his State Pension at 60, and if he's ever convicted he'll be sent to a female prison. One transsexual pressure group is now campaigning for British birth certificates to be alterable, as in some other countries. None of this bothers Barry unduly.

"I might want to marry one day, but I don't think you really need that bit of paper. All those things you swear—to love, honour and obey, in sickness and in health—you feel naturally anyway, don't you?"

Because he wrestles daily with problems that most people never face, Barry knows dark moments. "Sometimes I think that nature is a real trickster, that even gender itself is just a trick that she's played for the purpose of reproduction," he says grimly.

Yet one thought cheers him, especially if Carol's around: "One thing I'm sure of," he says confidently, "is that love is love no matter who you feel it for or what type of love it is." ●