

Bridging gender lines at Fantasia festival

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Crossdressers gather for nine-day fair

PROVINCETOWN — Jane is an electrical engineer. Jenny, a publisher. Eve, a successful self-employed manufacturer's representative selling basic industrial products to major mid-Western corporations.

What do these women have in common?

They are men.

They are high-powered achievers who share a passion — some might say compulsion — for sometimes dressing and living as women.

They call themselves "crossdressers," a term which embraces anyone wearing clothing of an opposite gender. It is a label preferable to "transvestite," they and others say, because it describes behavior, without ascribing motivations or imposing values.

This week in Provincetown about 75 crossdressers gathered from around the country to take part in Fantasia Fair. Tucking their male identities neatly in suitcases, they donned heels and designer dresses, casual and elegant attire, to take part in the annual nine-day event, designed to affirm their desire to cross gender barriers.

In fashion-workshops, they practiced sitting, walking and moving as women. At the Follies Thursday night before an appreciative, standing-room-only audience, some of them lived out fantasies of being Liza Minelli, Cher and Madonna.

In counseling sessions, personal growth workshops, panel discussions and informal conversations, they explored some of the tough issues related to sex and gender roles. What does it mean to dress in women's clothing? What does it mean to be born a man and, in this culture, embrace feminine feelings?



STAFF PHOTO BY RON SCHLOERB

Three "crossdressers" at the Cape-tip Fantasia Fair are left to right, Naomi, a high-powered Chicago attorney, Stephanie, who performed to Madonna's "Material Girl," and Ramona, who performed "Treat me as I am."

At an impromptu panel last week, following the fair's annual Town and Gown supper, several crossdressers shared their stories.

Eve, dressed in an elegant low-waisted, yellow wool dress, spoke of his childhood as the son of a German general. As World War II was coming to a close, the family was preparing to escape from invading troops, and the children were told to pack their knapsacks with only essential possessions. In Eve's sack? Two treasured items: a blouse and a skirt.

Jenny, approaching 6-foot-5 in heels and at Fantasia Fair for the first time this year, was once an All American basketball player and a U.S. Navy veteran. He has been happily married for 30 years. "My wife and family don't know about this," he said. "It's very hard for me not to tell, but it would only hurt them."

Jane, dressed in a tailored blue-knit suit and red pumps, has also struggled with secrets. He is an electrical engineer from New Jersey. He said it was 25 years into their marriage before he told his wife, Phyllis, about his obsession.

For Phyllis, who was listening in the audience, Fantasia Fair is still a difficult time. But the struggle is worth it, she said later. "Jane is my best friend."

In a second marriage, Eve said, he has found "total happiness," living half the week as a woman, the rest of the time as Ed.

He told of growing up to be a champion world cup soccer player, of an unhappy 25-year first marriage, and then of meeting, falling in love with and marrying Carole, a professional model.

They are husband and wife and best girlfriends, both partners said later. To the outside world — neighbors, friends, club members, and business colleagues — they are Ed

and Carole, a traditional husband and wife couple. But at home, three days a week, within the intimacy of their marriage, that changes. Ed's male role disappears, and they live together as Carole and Eve, confidantes, who love to shop, dine and spend time together.

Sometimes, Eve thinks he would like to spend more time as a woman. "I'd love to go to club functions as Eve," he said later. "But it would be a disaster. Let's face it. Society is not ready." And, living full-time as a woman, he said, would jeopardize a career that has taken 30 years to establish.

But it is personal considerations that are most important. Said Carole, "I love having Eve around. There hasn't been a time when I haven't wanted her here. But I couldn't give up Ed. I don't know how I could do that."

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According to experts, the whys of crossdressing remain a mystery, and

many crossdressers have come to accept that they may never find an answer to their apparent compulsion to cross gender lines to dress and live as women.

There is little hard research on the genesis of crossdressing, said therapist and organizational development consultant Niela Miller, here this week to lead workshops for crossdressers and their spouses.

"The only thing we can conjecture," she said, is that crossdressing arises when a number of factors — genetic tendencies, environmental and cultural conditions — come together.

Most crossdressers begin donning female attire early, and they are likely in a male-dominated society to experience guilt and uneasiness about their feminine feelings. As they

reach adulthood a common pattern is to become overachievers, said Ms. Miller and other experts.

Trying to prove their masculinity, "They don't just become ordinary," she said. They become star athletes, top-ranking officers in the military, and top executives.

Dressing in women's clothing becomes an escape valve, a release from what several crossdressers this week described as a feeling of deep anxiety. For some it is enough to dress only occasionally. For others, like "Virginia," a 73-year-old author and consultant, dressing and living as a woman has become a total commitment.

Seventeen years ago, he left behind his male identity, as Charles, to dress and live as a woman. Still others may find that even crossing the gender boundary is not enough and may opt for transsexual surgery.

Ms. Miller said her role is to help crossdressers be aware of who they are, to understand their choices, and to make those choices based on good, solid reasons.

Ariadne Kane, the director of Outreach Institute, sponsor of the fair, stressed the themes of self-acceptance and fulfillment. Ms. Kane, the fair's organizer, embraces both a male and a female identity, sometimes dressing as a woman, other times adopting a "soft" male appearance. It's time, she told crossdressers at a luncheon seminar this week, "to stop feeling guilty."

At the Follies Thursday night, it was Eve, dressed in a silver-and-blue-sequined gown, who drove the message home. Stepping into the audience for his final number, his graceful movement and striking presence belied his stature, as he belted out, "I am what I am."