

Firstly, I want to say to everyone here a big welcome on this lovely day and thanks to Stody Hall Gardens for putting on this event which I know will become an annual occurrence. I never tire of the well laid out garden and the variety and diversity of the plants and flowers which I think reflect the way we all are at this Rainbow Day.

When Kate asked me if I would talk to you she said I could talk about anything, so I want to talk about something very close to my heart. I'm going to talk about ME and how Oasis, the transgender support group I belong to, saved me.

Let me tell you all about me, Beccie, transgender, cross-dresser, gender fluid, gender oscillating, non-conforming, non-binary. If we want to use labels. Gender affirming surgery is not my journey, although I could do with looking 30 years younger. I am happily married and my wife has accepted Beccie as part of her life.

For about 20 years of my life, before coming to Norfolk, I was firmly in the closet, the door tightly closed, locked and nailed shut behind me. No one, including family and friends knew of my desire to express my feminine side. Dressing was snatched and hurried. It was a different world then with much less acceptance in society.

When I first arrived in Norfolk around 1991 there was no Norwich Pride, or social media and the internet was in it's infancy. In fact, the "T" had not even been added to LGBT.

Something it is very hard to be crossing that "T" in "LGBT". I have gender dysphoria, that is an incongruence between my biological sex and psychological identity. I present as transgender and it can be very hard to be OUT and PROUD.

The real problem, to many of us all those years ago, was dressing was often restricted to our homes or hotel rooms, it felt wrong, abnormal and guilt ridden. If we wanted to venture out en femme, it was often at night, away from our familiar surroundings and you always met a bloke walking his dog!!

Opening that front door, leaving the security of the house, getting in a car or walking down the street, that was a completely different thing. We yearned to go shopping, or sit in a park, to have a meal or go to the theatre but in daylight...To do these things would take real guts or absolute stupidity! To raise one's head above the parapet and be OUT. Wow!! We can but dream!

So what has given me that confidence to be OUT and PROUD now! What was instrumental in me sticking my head above that parapet all those years ago was meeting Barbara Ross around 1995, who ran the Oasis Transgender group from her home on the outskirts of Norwich. By that time, I had confided my secret to my wife and needed somewhere "safe" to express my feminine side.

For Barbara, the cardinal principle had always been a person's right to come to terms with who they are, no matter what society thought. She facilitated this, often painful, journey, provided a sympathetic ear and a skilled professional insight as a gender counsellor.

She gave me that lifeline, through Oasis, those few hours to be the person I yearned to be. Going to Barbara's house and enjoying the company of other ladies, gave it **normality**, made it **OK**. Barbara gave me the key to unlock the closest door, after all those years of being trapped. I was free, like the butterflies I have seen in these gardens today. When I attended Oasis I realised I was not alone, I was joining a group of people who shared similar experienced that I had, as I grew up.

During Barbara's 35 years as a gender counsellor to hundreds of clients, Barbara had seen – and indeed influenced – the gradual shift in attitude of medical professionals and of society in general. The award of an OBE to Barbara in 2011 was an important indicator and placed a significant flag of recognition of gender dysphoria in the public domain.

Unfortunately, we lost Barbara to cancer in 2015, but Oasis is her legacy and continues to provide support to people who need help. When Barbara was finding it difficult to run some of her meetings at her home around 2007, I took over the running of Oasis. It was my way of giving help to other that she had given to me.

I know I have come a long way, as has society, in those 30 years from the early meetings at Barbara's house, with my gender journey. I have gained in confidence, been more adventurous in my outings, although I still don't go down Prince of Wales Road on a Friday or Saturday night. I am more confident to talk about my transgender lifestyle. Being given the opportunity to talk today is a testament to the confidence I have gained.

On this journey I have slowly converged my **him** and **her** lives together. My wife and family have been very supportive. I have confided my secret life with close and distant friends and relations. In the process I have gained many new friends and lost very few friends. I am more comfortable with myself. I have two wonderful grown up children who now know and accept that Dad is different! I don't think I am odd or unusual, just someone, like all of us, on the gender spectrum.

I am very lucky. I know many people who have embarked on this journey and have lost partners, and many friends. The gender journeys we make can be both painful and rewarding.

I know today there are people here who Oasis has supported, and continues to support on their journeys. Oasis continues to provide that lifeline that I was given. Only last week one of our ladies, Lilly celebrated her first anniversary of attending Oasis. I know she is here today. These are her words not mine" *what a year it has been for me; full of joy, happiness and self-fulfilment. Possibly the happiest of my life, with so many dreams coming true. Oasis has been at the centre of my adventure.* "

So thank you Stody Hall, to Kate the owner and Richard the Head Gardener for putting on such a day and making it easier to raise our heads above the parapet and be OUT and PROUD.

Dream it, Wish it, Do it.

Beccie

