

# Inside the Beltway, Under the Radar

**Dr. Dana Beyer**

**April 3, 2011**



Sex is not just an anatomical condition rooted in our genitals.

Sex is determined in our brains.

So says Dr. Dana Beyer and I'm inclined to believe her. She's been through a lot.

However, we live in a society in which the anatomical part, that is to say the existence of a penis or a vagina, determines our sex. People like a definitive answer, "boy or girl," "yes or no," "true or false," "black or white." The vast majority of our culture finds it impossible to see that sometimes the answer may be gray.

We seem to need to set our children up from the very first breath when, with the bend of a doctor's head, the words "It's a girl!" or "It's a boy," are declared. It is at that point, just seconds after birth, that the raising of a certain kind of child usually begins.

It's what happened to Dr. Dana Beyer, a retired eye surgeon and future candidate for District 18 of the Maryland State Legislature, when she was born.

The problem for Beyer, who is also vice-president of Equality Maryland, was that she was declared a he. In all fairness to the obstetrician, it was the early 1950's and Beyer did have a penis. But after that, fairness has nothing to do with Beyer's story. It would be 50 years before Beyer would hear the words, "It's a girl!" celebrating the birth of her real self, the person she always knew she was even though she appeared to be a boy and then later a man. Dr. Beyer's story is by all means unbelievable, overwhelming, wrought with complexity, heart wrenching and worst of all, muddled with political and social complexities.

Beyer's story begins in utero when her mother began taking a drug that turned out to be highly poisonous. Though the drug was eventually taken off the market, it was used for two more decades, until 1971, wrecking havoc on thousands and thousands of lives. Though Thalidomide got loads of press because its side effects were visible -- physically deformed children -- the drug

Beyer's mother took, DES, had invisible side effects that took decades to uncover. It appeared to be a miracle drug, helping curb the onset of miscarriage, but "DES was the worst drug disaster in history," Beyer says. "Thalidomide everyone knows, but DES is really the worst mistake in history. It was marketed as a wonder drug. My mother, who was Phi Beta Kappa, was a smart woman. She took the drug and regretted it. She knew it was wrong but her doctor told her to take it. There was no informed consent," says Beyer.

It was 1951 and Beyer was a growing fetus in her mother's uterus. The problem was, that Beyer had an X and a Y chromosome; she was actually a male fetus, growing male body parts. Testicles had already begun to develop when Beyer's mother flooded her own body with DES and the drug crossed the placental barrier and entered Beyer's growing fetal body and brain. "I was flooded with estrogen. It over-determined my life. I blamed my mother for 50 years. I had a penis at birth and so I was called a boy, I was raised as a boy and I felt awful all my life. Most kids know their gender identity by the age of 3. I remember feeling that I wasn't a boy when I was 7. It took me some time to recognize I was a girl, but it was hard given that I had a penis. I spent years unobtrusively observing my mother and the other women in my life, as well as the girls in school. When I finally came out to my parents, they threatened to have me institutionalized in the local state mental hospital. This was a decade before de-institutionalization and these facilities were often horrendous. Electroshock therapy was common. There is a wonderful book by Dylan Scholinski, entitled, "The Last Time I Wore a Dress, which deals with this time in a similar situation in the 80's."

While puberty is hard on any teenager, imagine what it must have been like for Beyer who didn't know that while she had a penis on the outside she also had a partial uterus on the inside. "Having to go through one normal puberty is hard enough. To go thro' the wrong puberty is so difficult. When I was 12 I started menstruating through my penis. I had gotten my period. I hid the bloody clothing from my mother for months, until the pain became excruciating. I underwent months of repeated weekly medical treatments, silver nitrate being injected retrograde into my penis is a futile attempt to cauterize the bleeding. There was no ultrasound or CT scanning in those days; an IVP, or Intravenous Pyelogram, showed distended kidneys. Soon I went into renal failure, followed by septic shock and a near-death experience. After a surgical procedure and three weeks of IV antibiotics, I was sent home to undergo more months of the same treatments, which I came to understand as both rape and torture. I paid a very heavy price, but my growth spurt and the pubertal hormones finally shut down the bleeding."

Dr. Beyer survived her teen years as a boy: high school, college, etc. and went off to medical school. It was there that the world came crashing down, a Messianic moment you could say, when Beyer found out about DES during a medical school rotation. "I first heard about DES during my Gynecology rotation in 1976 (I was graduated in 1978), though the drug had been removed from the market in 1971 and catalyzed the women's health movement, including the publication of books like, "Our Bodies, Ourselves." The information just sat there, and I brought it up with my mother on my next visit home. She matter-of-factly remarked that she had taken it, and even though she wished she hadn't, it was clear she hadn't miscarried me. She knew the drug was no longer being prescribed because of the cancer link, but since we were not speaking about my gender variance, the issue just did not arise for another decade, until 1986 when the Edelman book, "Diethylstilbestrol – New Perspectives," was published."

In 1976, a year after high school, Beyer got married and confessed the belief she'd held all her life, that while she looked like a man, she was really a woman. While they both were confused by this reality, they ended up having two boys. "I was fortunate that my sperm were functional enough." Though Beyer and her first wife eventually divorced, it was not the gender issue that caused their marriage to dissolve.

Beyer came clean long before her second marriage, too, explaining that she wanted to have a transgender operation, to finally be the woman she had always known she was. Beyer says wife number two said, "'If you want to do this, I'll be there with you,' but in the end she didn't want to live with a woman," Beyer says, and the second marriage ended too. Beyer had continued to live like a man knowing that one day she would have the courage to go through with the operation. As for her boys, from the onset she had always planted the seed in her children's heads hoping that one day her children would no longer call her Dad. "I prepared my kids early on. I said 'Daddy is a little different than other Daddies. Your Daddy likes girl things.'"

It was after 9-11 that Beyer finally summoned the courage to go through with the transition. It was September 20th, 2001, just days after 9-11. "All my friends from elementary school were going to be at a friend's wedding and I decided to stop thinking of myself as a victim. I decided to have the courage to finally be myself. When I told my kids, they were fine. The younger one said, 'C'mon, Mom, let's go to Target and buy some jeans.'" Her boys were concerned about how DES might have affected them because it does have third generational effects, but once Beyer asked her boys how they felt about themselves and their sexuality, she let them know they had nothing to worry about.

Beyer's story and the story of all transgender individuals makes people uncomfortable. Asked what people fear, Beyer says candidly, "they fear the loss of the certainties that underpin their world. They become comfortable with the familiar, and soon learning new ideas and meeting new people becomes arduous. Surprises, once welcome to the child, become anxiety-provoking to the adult. This holds across the board for some people regarding modernity, and the loss of those certainties regarding sexuality, which were never there in the first place but were artfully hidden by society, frightens those with a certain mindset."

Think like a man, Think like a woman:

The transgender operation is a major undertaking, both physically and emotionally. From the physical, or surgical standpoint, transitioning from male to female is easier, Beyer says, because it's "easier to dig a hole than build a pole, but it's more difficult presenting as a woman in society," Beyer adds. There is "much heavier scrutiny." As for female to male transformation, "bearded, balding trans men fit right in because no one looks too closely. Their voices drop, they put on the uniform and slide into male society. When they act assertively they are welcomed, unlike the women who are shunned as bitches for being too masculine."

Beyer says she doesn't know what it's like to think like a man. "I don't know what it is like to be a man because I was never a man in my mind. In my brain I've always been a woman." But she does know what it's like in the proverbial men's locker room and that is as much a curse as it is a blessing. "I know what the men say and I know how afraid women are. As a man I was

welcomed to stand up and make my a point known. Now as a woman I'm a pushy bitch ... it's awful for women."

### Gender identity and sexual orientation

Gender identity is who you are: We are who we are based on our brain sex. Brain sex manifests as gender identity, our consciousness of our sex. We have nuclei in our hypothalamus that make us feel like we are women or men.

Sexual orientation is whom you love: Though reactionaries "lump us all together, lesbian, gay, bi, transgender," the reality is transgender is very different than gay, says Beyer. "In order to get their objectives to move forward, the gay community has needed to marginalize transgender. In fact, the gay movement says that transgender women are actually men who don't want to admit that are really gay and want to sleep with men but can't admit it. Again, they have reduced sex to sexual relations."

© Cari Shane Parven 2009