

COSMOPOLITAN

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“Was I Meant to Be a Man?”

At birth, they looked like girls and were raised as that gender. But years later, they made the

■ "When I was about 6 years old, I was sitting in the bathtub with another girl," begins Tammy Harwell. "I looked at her body, then at mine and thought: *Hum, I'm a little different down there.*" Three years later, Tammy was taken to a doctor who performed a pelvic exam on her in front of a spellbound audience of medical students. "It was so humiliating that I blocked most of it out," says Tammy, now 28. "But I do remember them measuring my genitals and hearing my mother cry." The confused 9-year-old was told that she'd never be able to have children because she lacked the body parts needed to conceive a baby—and that's as far as the explanation went.

But the really bad news was yet to come. At 13, Tammy was told she needed an operation to remove gonads inside of her, only she had no idea what gonads were and she didn't dare to ask. But she wasn't clueless about everything—she knew by now that her clitoris was larger than normal—almost two inches in length—and that every time she went to her doctor's office, she felt like "the biggest freak in the world," she says.

It wasn't until Tammy was 26, married, and taking courses for nursing school that she discovered why she felt, and to some degree looked, different from her female friends: Her chromosomes were actually XY (the male combination). "My professor held up a picture of what looked like a naked woman and said, 'This is actually a man,'" remembers Tammy. "Then he explained that the subject was a genetic male whose testes were

shocking discovery that forced them to search for their true sexual identities. **By Ruth G. Davis**

hidden in his abdomen." Tammy suddenly realized that the surgery she'd had as a child was to correct the same problem. "I made it through the rest of that class, but when I got into my car, I started bawling," says Tammy. She tracked down her family doctor, who confirmed that she had 5-Alpha Reductase Deficiency, a condition that caused her to look like a girl at birth—albeit with a small vagina and no uterus—because she lacked an enzyme necessary for the development of external male genitalia. When she hit puberty, her testes (undeveloped testicles, which are sometimes called gonads) began producing male hormones, so her doctor removed them to stop Tammy from masculinizing. (She was also given female hormones to reverse the process.) "That explains why I started having sexual fantasies about other women when I was a teen," says Tammy,

is intersexual are identity and intimacy," explains Howard Devore, Ph.D., a psychologist who counsels intersexuals and is himself intersexual. "They don't always identify with the gender they've been assigned, so they end up feeling isolated and depressed—and they have no idea why."

Here, four intersexual people describe what it's been like to spend most of their life in search of a sexual identity.

DELIVERY-ROOM DEMONS

The code of silence that surrounds an intersexual person begins early, and that was certainly the case for Kimberly Saviano. "I was brought in for surgery for two hernias as an infant, and when they opened me up, they found testes," says Saviano, 28, who has a condition called Partial Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome,

which prevented her body from responding properly to masculinizing hormones even though she's chromosomally male. (Some people with AIS look "superfeminine," with large breasts and no pubic or leg hair.) "Then at the age of 10, my parents and doctor told me I wouldn't menstruate or have children, and that was the last time it was discussed—it just became a non-subject," Saviano continues. "They never explicitly said it was something to be ashamed of, but that's the impression I was left with."

It's not uncommon for intersexual children to be left in the dark about their condition, but some doctors don't even let parents in on the whole truth. "My mom and dad were told that I needed a hysterectomy when I was 13 because I had cancer," says 32-year-old Hannah Brewster (not her real name), who also has AIS. "They only questioned it—and found out that I'd actually had my testes removed—when my younger sister, who also has AIS, had to have the same operation." The Brewster sisters didn't know exactly what was different about them, but they *sensed* a difference from early childhood. Tammy Harwell can relate. "It's hard to describe, but you just don't quite feel normal on the inside," she says. "I never felt very girlish and as a kid was something of a tomboy—I wore my hair short and would

rather play Star Wars than with a doll. It wasn't until high school that I even tried to conform."

TEENAGE WASTELAND

Adolescence isn't easy for anyone, but for an intersexual girl, it can be a time of unbearable humiliation. "Intersexual women often have unusual genitalia (small vaginas, large clitorises, or both) and are forced to explain them to their sexual partners," says Devore. And their already volatile emotions are intensified by the estrogen therapies that are usually administered when an intersexual girl hits puberty. Like many of the other medical procedures, the need for the estrogen pills is either misrepresented or unexplained.

for cybersupport

who had to come to grips with the fact that she was intersexual, or that she possesses physical traits of both genders.

"About 1 in 2,000 people are born with ambiguous genitalia," says Anne Fausto-Sterling, a biologist at Brown University and author of *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (Basic Books, 2000). "But if you include those with unusual chromosome mixtures—things that aren't visible to the eye—the incidence rises to 1 in 100."

There's more than one cause for intersexuality, but until recently, there's only been one method used to treat it. That was to assign the child a gender immediately and cover up the complicated details. Unfortunately, that quick fix often has damaging repercussions. "The biggest issues for someone who

Then there's the physical pain involved in trying to conduct a normal sex life. Hannah, whose condition left her with a small vagina, remembers losing her virginity at 15. "My boyfriend kept pressuring me to do it, and when we did, it hurt terribly," says Hannah, who continued to have sex despite the discomfort. "When I bled, I'd tell him that I'd had my period, even though I don't even get periods." But the explanations didn't end there. Adds Hannah: "I was also extremely self-conscious that I didn't have pubic hair, so I would tell guys I'd had a hysterectomy and didn't have the hormones to make any."

As a young adult, Hannah, who never masculinized, got involved in a string of abusive relationships, in part, she says, because of how insecure she had always felt growing up. "Having AIS really damaged my self-esteem because I always felt like I had to hide my body," she admits. Other intersexual teens become hypersexual in an attempt to fit in. "As a kid, doctors were always looking at my genitals with these puzzled expressions on their faces, so when I hit my teenage years, I tried to 'pass' by becoming promiscuous," says Tammy. "I was out there *proving* that I was a girl."

"As a kid, doctors always looked at my genitals with puzzled expressions, so as a teen, I tried to prove I was a girl by being promiscuous."

But most intersexual women shy away from sexual contact, according to Devore. "I went from being an outgoing kid to just staying home and reading books," says Kimberly. "My way of dealing with sex was by not playing the game. I never got dressed up, and I avoided dances and put on lots of weight so no one would want to date me." But Kimberly's self-exile took a toll. "I became suicidal, spending Saturday nights sitting in a tub with a razor in my hand," she says. "In college, I came out of my shell and became a hard-core partier—that was my escape. But I still didn't let anyone get close to me. I would date someone once or twice, then bail before it got physical."

THE MYSTERY UNRAVELS

Cheryl Chase was born with genitalia that could have been construed as either a large clitoris or a small penis. When, at 18 months, her doctors decided she should be raised as a girl, they surgically removed her entire clitoris and inner labia. "It became obvious when I was a teenager that my genitals had been altered," says Chase. "But it wasn't until I was 22 years old and got my medical records that I learned I had lived the first year and

a half of my life as a boy." Chase then founded the Intersex Society of North America (www.ISNA.org). "Finding out the truth is life-changing," says Cheryl. "It's painful, but the information is necessary in order to heal. Veiling the issue in secrecy is like having a grandfather die and telling a child it didn't happen."

Hannah was in college when she found out she had AIS. "In biology class we were taking samples from inside our cheeks to look at our chromosomes, and I just couldn't make sense of my sample," she remembers. "I wiggled out when I realized I had XY chromosomes." Robbed of information her whole life, Hannah reacted to her discovery by becoming voraciously curious about her condition. "I did research and would read anything I could get my hands on." One of the most helpful resources she came across was a Web site devoted to people with AIS (www.med-help.org/www/ais). And today, she identifies herself as an XY female, a concept her husband was a little uneasy with at first. "I think he thought, *What if she really is a man on the inside? Does that mean I'm attracted to men? And is she going to leave me for another woman?*" she says. But Hannah and her husband have stuck together, and recently they adopted a baby girl.



A Web page was also Kimberly Saviano's salvation. She now has plans to start one of her own to educate the public about being intersexual. "This big secret from childhood kept me down for a long time, and I wanted to reach out to others who were experiencing the same thing." So after growing up in a household where her ambiguous gender was a nonsubject, Kimberly has made a point of telling all her friends that she has AIS. "There were so many people who never got a chance to know me because the most important thing on my mind was something I didn't feel comfortable telling them. That made things kind of lonely," says Kimberly, who finally feels open to a romantic relationship.

Tammy Harwell got married at 18, but she felt lonely too. The reason, she now says, is because she had always been confused about her sexual orientation. Recently, Tammy and her husband separated, freeing her up to explore romantic relationships with other women. "And even if some days I'm all girl and other days I don't feel girlish at all, it's okay," says Tammy. "It's such a relief to be able to let the person I've always been on the inside finally show on the outside too." ■