



CASE STUDY

Frances and her mums: Transgender parenting

Trudy and Gaby have been together for five years and they have an 11-year-old daughter, Frances. They live in Mirboo North, a small rural community in Gippsland, Victoria. I originally interviewed Trudy in 2013 and I caught up with her again recently for an update. Trudy talks about her experience of raising Frances, and the journey she is taking with her partner, Gaby.

Can you tell me about your family?

My partner, Gaby, and I met about five years ago and last year we got married. Gaby is transgender and is in the process of transitioning to female. She started that process fairly seriously about a year after we met, in her mid-forties. We got married before she changed her name so technically she is my 'husband' at the moment.

Gaby had identified as trans privately since she was very young, but she was married for a long time to somebody who was never going to

accept it. They had three children who are now grown up. She kept it completely private, except for a couple of very close friends and it was never an option to transition, or even be out. Gaby's marriage ended 18 months before we met.

It is now pretty well established that gender dysphoria has a biological cause. The short version is that you are born with a male body and a female brain – or the other way around, of course. So if our brain is where our core self is – our memories, dreams, thoughts, passions and soul – it's not that Gaby is a man trying to

be a woman, it's that she's a woman who is fed up looking like a man. In many ways, transition has not been so much about changing gender – because in Gab's mind, she's always been female – nor even about affirming her gender: it's about transitioning from feeling trapped to feeling free.

Gaby is currently nearing the end of her transition. She changed her legal name and gender last June and is now Gabrielle (the formal version) or Gaby. All this has had its own challenges and joys in terms of being out in the town we live in and the surrounding communities where we work. But now she/we are completely out to everybody, and it remains – for the most part – a good news story, which is great.

Gaby works in the building industry as a designer and was fully expecting some negative reaction, but sometimes it's good when you're wrong. It hasn't been perfect. Now that it's all public, some family and friends are struggling a little, but not very much, and there is much love and acceptance around.

Gaby's adult kids are all okay with the changes. Indeed, she recalls telling her oldest daughter (now 24) that she was trans and the reply was, 'No shit, Sherlock!' So it seems you can't really hide.

We have Frances, who is 11 now and lives primarily with us. She spends every second weekend and half the holidays with my ex, Carol. Frances' legal parents are Carol and me, and Gaby is a step-parent. From pretty much the time she could talk, Frances used to scream out in the playground, 'My name is Frances and I've got two mums!' She's always been like that, had that confidence and that pride.

And tell me about where you live?

We live about 150 kilometres from Melbourne in a smallish community of about 2500 people, and it's heaven on earth. In 2009, when I met Gaby, she lived in much tinier community three and a half hours from Melbourne, where she'd lived for 27 years; a really lovely little community.

When we decided we were going to build a life together, we looked for a small rural community that was going to be progressive and a little closer to Melbourne. We drove through the town and saw the newsagent had a rainbow flag flying from it and found out it was owned by two men who are very much part of the community. There's a lot of acceptance here that doesn't always occur in other rural communities.

How has the community responded to your family?

It's mostly positive. Gab did not come out to a lot of people in the community straight away, though I certainly am completely out. There was a sense that I used to be one of *those* – a *lesbian* – and now I'm not. When we got married it was like, *Everything is okay now; she wasn't okay, but now she's fixed.* They know better now ...

Most of the kids at school know that Frances has a 'different' sort of family, they are just not sure of the details. And to most of them it doesn't matter. There have been a couple of tiny incidents, but really it could have been about her red hair or her glasses, and certainly the school administration and her teachers are very supportive.

So we are seen as a rainbow family, not that many people in the community really understand what that is. With Gaby, it's a fairly complex situation and we wanted to take our time with it. It's that whole thing about: *Do you come out to everyone in the supermarket queue?* That can be so unbelievably exhausting. As Gaby's transition progressed, people could clearly see the femininity, her long hair and rounded features. I think they are on a journey too, and in fact, that was our strategy – to bring people with us on the journey.

How has the journey been for Frances?

She said, 'OMG. Three mums! Mother's day is going to be a nightmare!'

Frances is different in lots of ways. She's got bright red hair and very thick glasses. She's also incredibly artistic but simply cannot understand maths, so she has a number of things that hold her apart from the average kid. But being in a rainbow family is something she is inherently very proud of. She's very proud of the fact that she's a little different, too; it's a really big part of her identity. But of course in that whole pre-adolescent way there's an edge of, *Oh my God that's so embarrassing!*

Frances sometimes used to get low-level freaked-out about Gaby's physical transition, because she was not completely clear about how Gaby would present. But she's largely fine with it and is pretty resilient. She's got a good social network and her friends and their parents have all found out in the last 12 months with very few problems.

There will always be little things and we are taking it very, very carefully. We were conscious of the burden of secrecy we were, by default, placing on Frances, particularly prior to Gaby's legal name change. I deliberately sought opportunities to talk to the parents of Frances' friends and so far it has been fine. We deliberately wanted to run ahead of the rumour-mill but it worked out to be a lot deeper than that; being honest, being genuine has a power. It is scary but, for the most part, it has been fine. Our openness has meant that even those people who are unsure are honest and are still our friends, and that means a lot. Frances' friends couldn't care less, which is as it should be.

Part of our strategy is that I've been really involved in a few community groups, including cubs/scouts, and that seems to be working really well. There's a very significant Christian community and my involvement means people get to know us as a family – we're not a *thing* we're an *us*.

We're still fairly new in this community but we've really been accepted and we know lots of people. For a while, we were doing a pretty

awful impersonation of a straight family. I'm pretty butch and Gab's not and people thought, *Well you're not mainstream, but is that because you're from Melbourne?!*

So what happens to your marital status now?

We ummed and aahed about getting married and thought about waiting for the laws to change. But we love each other too much and decided we actually wanted to get married as quickly as possible. And we did and it was great.

When people ask if we are married, we say 'yes', but there are currently two things in the way of Gaby changing her legal gender on her birth certificate. Gender affirmation surgery needs to be completed (scheduled for mid-2015) and you actually have to be single. That's really awful, because the reason we would have to cite on divorce papers would be 'irreconcilable differences', which basically means we'd be committing perjury and Gaby is not prepared to do that. It's a stupid system. So we will have to wait for the marriage laws to change – and they will at some point – before birth certificate changes can be completed. And then I can legally have a wife!

What makes this even more ridiculous is that, almost without exception, every single organisation, professional body and government department has completely accepted Gab's change, including gender markers like *Ms* on all paperwork and forms. Banks, VicRoads, Medicare, superannuation and professional associations have all been fine with it. But Centrelink insist on calling her *Mr*. They are completely okay with her name change, just not the gender markers. Sheesh! On the one hand, we are incredibly lucky to already be married when so many others in our community cannot be, but there are so many inconsistencies.

How we got here – and how it all links together – is unique, but it works. It's a tricky journey but it's

right for us. We celebrate a good day by having a great family dinner. We look forward to different events each week. We love birthdays and hate it when *Doctor Who* and *Master Chef* aren't on, or when someone forgets to put the iPad on charge. At the end of the day, we're just a family.



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