

"I'm proud to be intersex"

Being born both female and male has led Tony Briffa, 44, to campaign for the law to treat every person as unique



PHOTOGRAPHY: NATHAN DYER

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE INTERSEX

- + Being intersex refers to someone's biological sex, not their gender identity or sexual orientation.
- + Intersex people have congenital differences in sex characteristics such as chromosomes, genetic expression, reproductive parts and hormones. They can have attributes of both sexes or lack attributes considered necessary to be defined as either.
- + This difference can occur in one in 280 births, according to Australian estimates.

For more information, visit Organisation Intersex International Australia at oii.org.au

"It's been nearly a year since I married my partner, Manja, in a beautiful ceremony in New Zealand. In my wedding vows, I promised to be the 'best husband and wife possible'. Sadly, we couldn't marry here in Australia because the law requires marriage to be 'between a man and a woman to the exclusion of all others'. I can't fit such a narrow definition because I was born biologically both female and male – I'm an intersex person.

I was born with Partial Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome (PAIS). Doctors weren't sure what my sex was because I was born with biological features of both sexes. Doctors decided that my testes should be removed and I should be raised as a girl because I didn't have a penis and appeared more female than male. I was named Antoinette and I went to the local Catholic all-girls school.

Despite doctors not wanting me to know, there were constant reminders I was different. I spent a lot of time in hospitals being examined and having tests. I was told not to talk about it because it was a secret. Over time, I learned I couldn't have children and I'd never get periods. I was confused; I felt like a freak and very alone.

THE SECRET WAS OUT

By 18, I'd seen my medical records and things made more sense. I got married to an understanding man, but we divorced soon after. At 26, I started having relationships with women. This was a very exciting time in my life, but I still felt it best to hide the "real" me and my "shameful" secret.

At 29, I found a website for intersex women. I discovered there was much more to PAIS than I'd been told. I then asked my doctors to give me the testosterone my testes would have produced if they hadn't been removed. They refused so I went public, coming out as an intersex person on the Nine Network program 60 Minutes. I then got my testosterone.

Changes came within months – my voice deepened and I grew hair in places that I'd never had hair before. At 30, I decided to try

living as a man and had my birth certificate changed from female to male and my name from Antoinette to Anthony. The response to the 60 Minutes show made me realise that intersex people had been hidden away for far too long. I became the public face of intersex people in Australia and got involved in legislating to protect the rights of intersex people. The more I did the more I wanted to actively campaign for human rights and represent others, and my mind started to turn to broader community involvement.

"Growing up, I felt like a freak and very alone"

In 2008, I ran and was elected to the local council. I served for six years as councillor, deputy mayor and mayor in the community where I'd grown up as "Antoinette". I was reported to be the "world's first intersex mayor", and I think the locals appreciated the openness I brought to my public roles.

My journey of self-discovery was also gaining its own momentum. In advocating for others, I began to accept that my natural female and male biology also reflected how I felt as a person. I'm more than just a woman or a man – I'm both. I'm still fighting for the law to recognise me as the person nature made me. Despite being born with both female and male biological attributes, the law requires me to be one sex for my birth certificate, passport and other legal documents.

I'M JUST "TONY"

I've become used to people referring to me as "he or she". It's understandable given that they're correct either way. It's rare for someone to use my past to try to deliberately hurt me though, sadly, it has happened.

My desire to take on the responsibilities of parenthood and be a positive influence have led me to foster care. Being intersex hasn't made any real difference – to my foster kids I've always just been Tony.

It's a challenge living in a society that's divided so clearly into men and women. But I feel very comfortable having accepted my true self and that I'm not male or female, but both. I'll continue to live as "Tony" but I'm now at a point in my life where I can celebrate being different. Thankfully my wife, my family and my friends understand and accept all parts of me."



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