

BRADFORD WRITES!
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How Samantha Became Jackson

By Jackson Wennberg

I was always labeled a tomboy as a child. I didn't like stereotypical girl clothes; I despised dresses, skirts, and anything frilly. Dark-colored T-shirts, blue jeans, and gym shorts were more my style, and always from the boy's section. Once I hit first grade, I chopped my long hair off. From then on, I would rock a bowl cut. I hung around mainly boys and played boy-dominated sports. That's why it wasn't a surprise when I came out as transgender.

In elementary school, I was one of the boys. When we had gym class, we were sat on two lines separated by our gender. I remember feeling lonely and confused to be separated from my boy friends, even if it was just for attendance. My friends would regularly tell me to just go sit with them. Grabbing my legs and jokingly pulling me over to the boy's side. It felt wrong to be categorized as a girl when that's not how I felt inside. At the time, transgenderism was not in the news nor was anyone talking about it publicly. I had however heard about sex changes. My ninth birthday was coming up and I knew what I wanted. I was going to ask for a sex change! Now as an almost nine-year-old, I had no idea what the hell I was talking about. But what I did know was that it felt more comfortable being addressed as a boy than a girl. I articulated a note to my mother telling her exactly that; I wanted a sex change for my ninth birthday! I wanted to be a boy. With the utmost courage, I slid this note onto her side table and waited for her response.

"Sam, you can't get a sex change at nine years old," my mother calmly explained to me. "We can come back to this conversation when you're older, sixteen."

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My mother presents as a feminine woman today. With long red hair and a full face of makeup to make appearances. She wasn't always this way, her younger years consisted of short haircuts and wearing her brothers' clothes. Because of this she never forced me to adhere to the gender binary of womanhood. I didn't quite understand why I couldn't get a sex change, but I had hope that she would be supportive of my decision once I was older.

This didn't bother me until a year later and I hit puberty. I remember the awful feeling of putting on a tight shirt and seeing my burdened breasts. The urge to rip the shirt and my skin off with it. I refused to wear bras. Bras were enemy number one in my mind. Even when my mother and brother were urging me to try training bras, I refused. The thought alone made me sob. The fact that my chest would never be flat again ruined me. When I finally buckled and started wearing bras it was only sports bras. It felt like I was in a straitjacket. I didn't want these breasts, nor did I want to be constrained because of them. And then the inevitable happened and I got my first period. Sitting in class I remember my stomach hurting in a way it had never hurt before. My stomach felt as if it was ripping. I ran to the bathroom and low and behold my underwear was crimson red.

Of course, I knew what a period was, but my mom didn't get hers until she was much older. So, we hadn't had the actual talk about it yet. I rolled up some toilet paper and went back to class. I was embarrassed and disgusted, so I didn't tell my mother when I arrived home.

"Sam, did you start your period?" My mother asked me as she was doing the laundry and found incriminating evidence.

I confessed that yes, I had begun my first menstrual cycle. And while this did not embarrass my mother, it embarrassed me. We went to Walmart to get my first menstrual products. Standing in front of the mile-long array of pads, tampons, and diva cups made me

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queasy. Pads with designs of stars and flowers made me feel as if I was about to die. I would have to deal with this every month for decades. It broke my heart. Eventually, I became extremely depressed and anxious because of this. I began to isolate myself in my room. I cried almost every day. Why did my body feel like this? Why did it feel like there was something on my body that I couldn't get off no matter how hard I tried? I felt hopeless.

It wasn't until I was twelve years old and was gifted a phone that I discovered what being transgender meant. I downloaded the popular app Musical.ly (now TikTok) and found that there were teenagers who were transitioning. I felt connected to them in a way that was confusing and confirming. I battled with my brain for weeks. Am I transgender? I didn't know what to do, the term felt right but it was all so new and overwhelming. One night I decided I needed to talk to someone; to tell someone that I think I'm transgender. But once I wrote the text, I got anxious. This would change the rest of my life. How people view me, how society would view me. I deleted it and went back to bed sobbing. I couldn't take it anymore, the constant crying, the urge to cut my chest off with scissors and be done with it. Finally, one-night mid sob I gathered my courage, and I texted my bisexual friend Leandra. She was incredibly helpful and supportive. She even helped me pick the first name I went by, Alex. That same night I wrote my mom a letter, explaining to her that I was questioning my gender and sexuality. The next morning, I put it in her car to find before leaving for work. I went to school as normal, bottling up the confusing feelings I was experiencing. When I arrived home later that day, I talked to my mother. She was nothing short of supportive but concerned about how my life would be different, and how others would react. My mother was scared for me. And while I was scared too, I was ready to start living my life authentically. That same night I wrote her one last note.

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“Mom I am coming out as your bisexual son. I am transgender and my name from now on will be Alexander Sam Wennberg (obviously that did not stick).”

On this note I put a little drawing of me, her son, smiling. I put this note under her coffee cup the next morning for her to find before work. I went to school and came out to my friends and peers. Leandra was with me all day. Supporting me on my journey of coming out as Alex. It felt like there was a weight leaving my chest. I got home from school and my mother told me how much she loved me and that she supported me. From then on, I would be her third son, not her first daughter. Almost immediately my mother purchased a chest binder for me. A piece of clothing that flattened my chest to replicate a man’s chest. I cried tears of joy knowing that I could look down and not have to see breasts. The anxiety that came with developing breasts started to fade. My skin didn’t feel like it was crawling with bugs for the first time since beginning puberty. I was finally comfortable in my body again.

Thinking back to younger me it makes sense that I came out as transgender. But when you are in that situation it’s horrifying. My life would be different in every way. How would I know if my mother would support me and my transition? How would my peers and the adults around me react? But after being out and proud as a transgender man for six years; I have never felt more confident in my identity or body than I am now. Looking in the mirror used to be painful. Seeing a little girl with such soft features caused me to avoid mirrors. That wasn’t me in the mirror looking back at me. But now I look in any mirror I walk by, finally seeing me. A confident young man with harder features, shitty facial hair, and a receding hairline. Now I can look back on my experiences as a young girl and smile knowing she would soon become he.