

*Born with a Boy's Mind and a Girl's Body, Alyn Libman Struggled to Find Peace—and Now Tries to Help Others*

From the first day of kindergarten, Alyn Libman felt different. The other girls played with Barbies and dress-up games; Alyn wanted to climb trees. The big problem came at potty break, when Alyn headed for the boys' room—and the teacher stepped in the way. "I just said, 'Why?'" recalls Libman. "I didn't understand."

Born a girl, Libman, now 18, simply never felt like one. That internal dissonance—and the torturous, sometimes violent harassment that it provoked—led to years of pain and loneliness. Eventually it also led to a new life for the Los Angeles native, who now identifies as male and is undergoing medical procedures to, by most definitions, become one. That places Libman in a small but increasingly visible group of teenagers who proudly embrace the label "transgender." "I stood up and said, 'This is who I am,'" says Libman. "I finally accepted myself."

Psychologists say such individuals have always existed (among the best known are '70s tennis pro Renee Richards and '50s GI Christine Jorgensen). But only in recent years—with publicity from the 1999 film *Boys Don't Cry* and new laws in some states to protect transgenders—have they taken steps toward the mainstream. Although psychiatric diagnostic manuals have traditionally labeled Libman's condition a gender-identity disorder, many professionals now take issue with that term. Still, no one agrees on its cause. "You don't choose your maleness or your femaleness," says Leslie Lothstein, a psychologist in Hartford, Conn. "It's the same for a transgender person."

Nor, it seems, can those who find themselves in the gray area between the sexes escape often frightening harassment. According to the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), 24 transgender people were murdered in the U.S. last year. Libman, a senior honor student and now an activist lobbying for laws to prevent such crimes, understands the dangers all too well: "I know there are people who can hate so much, they can harm me."

It's a lesson that started early for Libman (named Alyn at birth after a deceased uncle), the only child of Jacob, 55, who owns and manages rental properties, and Robynne, 50, co-owner of an industrial-lubricant business. Libman's academic career is a diary of emotional and physical abuse: After a student at an L.A.-area private school called second-grader Alyn a "dyke," Alyn reacted with a punch and landed in the principal's office. The next year classmates routinely shoved Alyn down the stairs. In eighth grade a group of kids attacked him with punches and kicks. "I felt like a freak," says Libman. "I thought about committing suicide. I was afraid every day I went to school."

Outside school Libman excelled as a figure skater but felt tortured wearing the makeup, nylons and dresses required to compete. After migraines brought on by stress caused his grades to tumble in ninth grade, he let mom Robynne in on the ongoing struggle. "I told her I thought that I was gay," recalls Libman, admitting that "the label 'lesbian' felt comfortable, but it didn't feel quite right."

The search for answers led Libman to a school-district support program for gay students and then in 1998 to the novel *Stone Butch Blues* by transgender activist Leslie Feinberg. "I was crying when I reached the end," says Libman. "It was the first time I had the right word for who I was." Breaking it to the family was another matter, but the Libmans offered support. (Alyn has long had cool relations with dad Jacob, but grandfather Martin Fuhrman, 78, has even bought Alyn men's briefs as a gift.) "When Alyn finally said, 'This is who I am,'" says Robynne, "I could see how much happier Alyn was."

Finding a secure identity, Libman became an activist, starting a Gay-Straight Alliance club and working to raise awareness of California's law—one of two in the nation—making it illegal to discriminate on the basis of actual or perceived gender identity. Libman "was suddenly proud," says school counselor Tobias Maxwell, "and the world was going to hear about it." Libman's first victory, after years of being forced to use the girls' restroom, was gaining access to a nurse's bathroom.

Feeling more empowered has helped Libman make friends—even have girlfriends, though future mates are likely to be lesbians. "Straight women wouldn't understand me or my body," Libman says. In November Libman took the first steps toward altering that body, starting with testosterone shots twice a month; they have already brought on changes such as a lower voice and facial hair. Libman will probably also opt for a bilateral mastectomy but will likely forgo lower-body genital surgery, which can cost as much as \$100,000. "I don't see the point. It's not for me."

Though making such decisions public does give him a sense of vulnerability, Libman, who plans to start college this fall, no longer worries what the family will think—particularly Mom. "I don't think I can say anything that will shock her," says Libman. "Unless I told her I want to wear a dress."

Thomas Fields-Meyer  
Ulrica Wihlborg in Los Angeles

Contributors:Ulrica Wihlborg.