

## ESOL VOICES: Student Spotlight

Catherine Chin Peters

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*Catherine Chin Peters is from Taiwan. She has lived in the United States 9 years and is married. Catherine has a college degree from Brockport; she is taking ESOL at MCC to improve her writing skills. In this essay, Catherine interviews a transgender woman named Jean. Catherine's interview reminds us that it is only by taking the time to get to know those who are different from us can we really understand and respect each other, and learn to embrace diversity.*

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### Jean's Story

This is Jean's story. How did I meet her? One day she came to my bank and tried to cash a check. She was tall and strong and had an Adam's apple. I was startled, but I still needed to do my job. When I asked for her ID, her face flushed, and she raised her voice. She asked me, "Why?" I soon realized she was embarrassed because her ID had a male's name "Jim," and the name on the check was Jean. So she couldn't cash the check. After I explained why we couldn't cash the check, she was calm and accepted what we suggested. And at that moment, I knew I found a person to interview. I believed her story would be interesting.

When I asked her for the interview, she hesitated, but after she listened to my reason, she said, "Okay." I was so surprised that she was willing to be interviewed, but I was also really excited. It was a Saturday afternoon when we met at Panera Bread. After a little chat, Jean started telling her story.

Jean is single, but she wants

to get married one day. When she mentioned that she wanted to get married, she blushed like a girl.

She is the third child in a middle class family; she has three sisters and one brother. Her father was a firefighter and her mother was a teacher at an elementary school. Her family is very traditional and has strong Christian beliefs, especially her father, so she went through a very difficult childhood with him. At that moment, I saw sadness in her eyes. She told me when she was a little girl, she liked playing with a baby doll, but her father always rebuked her and forced her to play with boys' toys and to play many sports.

Around age five, she started to like wearing dresses, her mom's high heels, and makeup on her face, and checking herself in front of the mirror secretly. Several times she got caught by her sisters and brother, and they called her a freak. Her mother was very disappointed with her behavior, so she decided to tell her mom the truth. She explained to her mom,

"I believe there is a girl who is living in my body." Within a second, her mom started crying and told Jean "No! You are just confused, and you are a boy."

Jean heaved a deep sigh, but she continued telling her story. She said her parents tried to find many ways to help her with her gender issues. They asked a pastor from church to counsel her; they brought her to see a psychologist; they sent her to Boy Scouts, and so on. But nothing changed in her mind; she knew she wanted to be a girl.

At school, Jean always liked playing with girls, so her boy classmates called her "Sissy." She got bullied so much at school. She always was surrounded by a group of students, trying to pull down her shorts, climbing on her back, and playing a thousand tricks on her. She said, "It was a nightmare for me to be at school." She explained that every day she had a huge fight with her mom to go to school, and she didn't remember how many times she pretended

that she was sick to avoid school. While she was talking about her childhood, I saw her tears in her eyes. I felt so sad for her. I could imagine how hard it would be.

When she grew up, she tried several times to go out with some women, but it never worked out. She forced herself to behave like a man, such as hanging out with other men at bars, playing on a male basketball team, and even going to the gym to build up her muscles. Now I knew why she was so strong.

But again, it didn't change anything in her mind; she wanted to be a woman. She said, "It was like a seed of a tree and the idea grew every.....every...single day." One day she read a story about Lynn Conway who is an American computer scientist and a transgender activist. They had a lot in common, and Lynn's story motivated Jean a lot, so about five years ago, Jean started doing her transition operation procedure.

When she made the decision, she thought that she had to inform her family. She wanted her family to support her, but unfortunately, only her younger brother and one sister accepted her decision; the other family members were so

angry at her, especially her parents.

Jean didn't talk to her father for at least three years; she didn't receive any invitation to her parents' house at all. If her parents saw her at family reunions, they wouldn't say anything to her. "But recently things have changed a little bit," she said delightedly. Her mother fell down and hurt her ankle. Her father was too old to take care of her, and her sisters and brothers didn't have much time to deal with it, so she took the responsibility. Now Jean goes to her parents' house to check her mom almost every day, and she does the groceries and shopping for them, too. Her father still doesn't talk to her much, but at least they started having a little conversation each time when she is there. "I believe one day they will accept me," she said. I nodded my head and said, "Yes, they will one day."

In my opinion, for a transgender person, it is like God gave him or her a difficult test in their life. I admire these people because they need so much bravery to accomplish their dream to be the gender they really are. Jean told me she needs to take hormone

therapy treatment for the rest of her life. Also, she has to deal with the social pressures of being transgender in a town where not everyone is open-minded, including her own family.

I think Jean still has a long way to go in her transition, but I do believe one day her family members and her friends will accept and support her decision of "being a woman." And one day she will meet someone who loves her and she will get married. When we finished the interview, I thanked Jean for giving me the wonderful story. And I said, "Good luck, Jean!! I believe you will make it one day."

A slow smile spread across her face. "Yes, I believe it will happen," she said. We said good bye to each other, and I saw her walk away in the sunshine. I thought, transgender people are not any different from anyone else; they try to succeed to live a very happy life, so why won't our society accept them? Jean's story gave me a good chance to know better about transgender people. I give my best wishes to them, and I felt this short interview was the opening of a bright new world for me. Thank you, Jean!