

Supporters: Araujo just trying to be herself

Daily life can be difficult, say others who identify with other gender

By Barry Shatzman, STAFF WRITER
Inside Bay Area

Jack Thompson avoids mirrors at all costs.

It's not that he considers himself unattractive. The 19-year-old Berkeley resident has had his share of girlfriends — including one now. His aversion to mirrors stems from something much deeper.

"When I look in the mirror, I see someone I know for a fact I'm not. It's like seeing someone that you've never seen before," he says.

Anatomically, Jack Thompson is female.

In the just-ended trial of three men charged with murdering Newark transgender teen Gwen Araujo, one defense attorney argued the killing happened in the heat of passion after the defendants — two of whom claimed to have had sexual relations with Araujo — discovered she was anatomically male.

Araujo's family and transgender advocates denounced that tactic, saying it was blaming the victim. Gwen Araujo, they say, was not trying to deceive anyone. She was just trying to be who she was.

Of course, it is impossible to know exactly what Araujo thought and felt. And the situation of every transgender person is different, said Cheryl Poniatowski of Fremont. A transsexual who came out later in life — she was married and has children — Poniatowski said the number of transgender people is higher than many think.

"(After attending workshops,) I found out that even I was somewhat ignorant. So it's plain to me the average person has no idea what it means, other than what they see on 'Jerry Springer,'" she said.

Still, when Thompson and Poniatowski speak, common threads emerge.

"The length of my arms and the hair on my head — my whole body does not seem right to me," Poniatowski said at a workshop in May. She stresses that transsexuality is not a fetish or lifestyle choice.

"It is a life-threatening birth defect that often requires medical attention," she writes.

There is scientific evidence supporting the idea that a person's gender is not simply a function of his or her anatomy. One study, performed 10 years ago, reported that certain parts of a male-to-female transgender's brain more closely resemble that of a female than that of a male — straight or gay.

Other studies suggest gender identity is formed in the brain before birth, and the genes responsible develop before the sex organs are formed.

On her Web site, Poniatowski discusses some of the treatment she has endured from others — including family members — because of her situation.

"Attacking a transgender for being transsexual is like attacking a paraplegic for being paralyzed. What the hell do you expect us to do about it?" she writes. Even the best of situations often are strewn with traps, and people you might have known your entire life — even if they have no problems with it — still will treat you differently, Thompson says.

"People know you being exactly one thing. ... They have to alter everything their mind tells them every time they look at you," he says.

Still, Thompson recounts "nudges" in the hallway of his Berkeley high school, and the people who would stare at him through the window of his classroom. And the fear of never knowing whom he may encounter on any particular day who might pose a more serious threat.

"You wake up every morning, and you have to think, 'Just don't die today.' ... Am I wearing comfortable shoes enough to run?" he said. "And where Gwen lived, it was a lot worse."

Thompson, who says he met Araujo a few times at conferences and knew a few of her friends, said her situation also was harder in going from male to female because of the people she would encounter in dating or sexual situations.

"Women in general are a little more understanding.

"For guys, it's a huge blow to the male ego," he says.

Even so, Poniatowski describes the "gay panic" defense employed in this trial and others as being based on a lie.

There is no way the defendants could have had anal sex with Araujo without noticing her male genitalia, she says.

They also would have noticed her masculine — or at least androgynous — body that did not have breasts or fatty deposits, she adds.

"I wouldn't know how to do it. People just automatically attribute supernatural powers to transsexual because it is so weird," Poniowski says.

Although they never met, Poniowski said Araujo probably was going through what most 17-year-olds go through — things such as wondering where their lives would take them.

"She was dealing with another issue on top of this — a profound medical issue that disturbs a person's entire life," Poniowski says.

And at 17, Poniowski adds, it seemed she was just not prepared for it all.

"It is dangerous dealing with those issues. She felt safe. But in reality, she was not safe."

Staff writer Barry Shatzman can be reached

at (510) 353-7003 or e-mail bshatzman@angnewspapers.com.