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Transgender student takes national stage

Zach Kerr was born a girl, but knew from early on that was wrong. With his family's support, he's finding himself – and inspiring others.

By Bella English | GLOBE STAFF FEBRUARY 18, 2014

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Zach Kerr in his dorm room at Wheelock College.

Grace and Gary Kerr had three boys under the age of 6 when she became pregnant again, this time with triplets. The Methuen couple learned ahead of time that they were going to have three girls.

“I wanted to know because if it was three more boys, I was going to need time to adjust to that,” says Grace.

On Dec. 6, 1993, at New England Medical Center, Grace gave birth to three identical girls: Amy, Amanda, and Sara. “We had five kids in diapers, five in car seats,” says Grace, who teaches third grade. “That first week, we went through more than 300 diapers.”

From toddlerhood, Amanda preferred playing with her brothers’ trucks and toys, and wore their T-shirts with basketballs or frogs on them, not the girly pink favored by her sisters. At age 3, when asked what she wanted to be when she grew up, she would reply: “A boy.”

GRACE KERR

The triplet sisters as babies (from left): Amy, Sara, and Amanda.

At first, her parents thought it was cute. But by the time Amanda was 5 and insisting that she was, in fact, a boy, it got old.

“I told her, ‘No, you’re a girl. This isn’t funny anymore,’ ” Grace recalls.

But the little girl wasn’t joking.

Today, Amanda is Zachary, a 20-year-old freshman at Wheelock College whose activism on behalf of LGBT rights has earned him national recognition, including a TeenNick HALO Award from Nickelodeon last fall.

Zach speaks to students, parents, educators, to churches and community groups and others about being transgender — or not identifying with the gender one is born into. He serves on the youth advisory board of Lady Gaga’s Born This Way Foundation, works with Greater Boston PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) and with the state’s Safe Schools Program for Gay and Lesbian Students. On campus, he’s developing a peer mentoring program for LGBT youth.

But the path from confused girl to confident guy was not easy. “No one noticed I was a boy, just in a girl’s body,” Zach says today.

Grace Kerr, 51, whose sister is a lesbian, considers herself and her husband to be open-minded. The truth was, they had never heard the word “transgender” and instead figured their daughter was gay.

“My husband and I had several discussions,” says Grace. “We said we wouldn’t be surprised if she grew up to be a lesbian.”

At age 8, Amanda was the only girl in the Methuen Pop Warner football league. At 9, when one sister trick-or-treated as a fairy, the other as a cheerleader, Amanda went as a football player.

Still, she was as bewildered as her parents. One night, in the seventh grade, she chopped off her hair and collapsed, sobbing, onto her mother’s lap. “Do you think you’re a boy?” Grace asked gently.

The answer: “Yes.”

It was the first real step. Amanda had found an online article about transgender people and stayed up until 4 a.m. reading: “I realized this is me, this is who I am.”

The revelation came as a relief to the entire family: They had a name for what had shadowed Amanda since the earliest years. “A lot of what people don’t realize that it’s not about being trans. We know that is who we are,” says Zach. “The biggest problems are that it can cause depression and anxiety.”

According to the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, nearly half of transgender youth have seriously contemplated suicide, and one-quarter report having made an attempt. A 2007 study by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network revealed that 90 percent were verbally harassed and more than half physically harassed.

MARK LORENZ FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

One of Zach’s brothers, Tim (in back), his parents, Gary and Grace, and Amy, Zach, and Sara.

Suicide was something Zach now says he thought about regularly. Age 14 was toughest. At the beginning of eighth grade, Amanda began to transition into the life of a boy. She stopped wearing girls’ clothes and kept her hair boy-short. She asked friends to use male pronouns for her.

Amanda asked her mother if she'd picked out any boy names early in her pregnancy. "She said she always liked the name Zachary," one of the triplets, Sara, recalls. For a middle name, it was David, after a favorite uncle.

"I'll be honest," says Grace Kerr. "It was easier for my husband than it was for me. My kind of light bulb moment came when I was telling my oldest son what was happening, and he said, 'Does it make you love her any less?' I said no, and he said, 'Then what does it matter?' "

Grace adds: "I was feeling like I was losing my daughter, but I began to realize that I never had that daughter to begin with. I realized I would rather have a happy son than a daughter who committed suicide."

Though Zach's transition wasn't as hard for Gary Kerr, 49, as it was for his wife, the Tewksbury firefighter knew that society was not as understanding. "Unfortunately, I made the mistake of watching a documentary about Matthew Shepard the next day after Zach came out," he says, referring to the 21-year-old murdered in an anti-gay hate crime in 1998. "As a parent, I will always worry about the fear of someone doing something." But he says he feels lucky to live in a state that is more progressive than other parts of the country.

The couple took a team approach to their teenager's transition. They found a therapist who saw Zach regularly. They consulted with a Methuen High School guidance counselor: All six Kerr kids attended the school.

"For me, it was always about what Zach needed to make his transition smoother," says Martha Tatro, the guidance counselor. At the beginning of his junior year, Tatro sent an e-mail to faculty explaining Zach's situation. Other than one teacher who initially balked at the name change, high school was a pretty smooth ride.

For concerts, the band director let him wear a tuxedo instead of the skirts the girls wore. The theater clubs cast him in male roles. At summer theater camp, he sang in the boys' chorus.

PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

A key part of the team effort is Dr. Norman Spack, head of the Gender Management Service (GeMS) Clinic at Boston Children's Hospital, one

of the few places in the world that helps families with a transgender child, and medically treats such children.

Zach Kerr in his dorm room at Wheelock College.

Though Zach had been socially transitioning into a boy since eighth grade, he didn't start physically transitioning until the end of his sophomore year. Under Spack's supervision, he began taking male hormones, which he will do for the rest of his life.

Today, he's got a deep voice, an angular face, a hint of a mustache, and a fringe of beard. On a recent day, he's wearing brown cords, a striped shirt, and sneakers. His green eyes often disappear into a grin, and he shakes hands heartily.

His next step will be "top surgery," or breast removal. For now, he binds them tightly. "After a while, my back hurts," he says.

"If I had the money, I'd pay for top surgery right away," says his father. Because his wife works during the day, Gary Kerr is the one who went to most of Zach's medical appointments. He says he is proud of his son's courage, and has heard no negative remarks from fellow firefighters.

Zach is proud of his father too. "After my sisters, my dad is the first one who just got it," says Zach. "It's weird for people to hear. He's a firefighter, he went to voc-tech school and was a plumber, he was in the Coast Guard."

His family says they're just relieved that the sad sister has been replaced by a happy brother. "Before he transitioned, he always looked at the ground when he talked to people," says Sara. "When he transitioned, he was happy and looked up."

Amy, a sophomore at Suffolk University studying in London this semester, agrees. "He's not angry now. He has gained confidence that, as a girl, he never had."

At the start of his junior year, Zach had his name legally changed. Friends in the high school band made a banner that said: "Congrats, Zachary David Kerr! It's a boy!"

But kids can also be mean, and Zach heard and saw some brutal comments. When he won the Nickelodeon award, some online commenters threatened to boycott the network.

Zach laughs them off, but admits to worrying about his safety. “Especially being very out and very public,” he says. “I have to be afraid of people hurting me, of not wanting me around.”

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Zach Kerr in his dorm room at Wheelock College, where he is majoring in social work with an aim to counsel.

He wants people to know that though he has had an easier time than many transgender youth, with a supportive family, school, and medical help, this is not a life he chose.

“Why would anyone choose this? I would never wish this upon anybody,” he says. “There’s nothing worse than feeling like you’re in the wrong body and having to deal with that every single day.” He is majoring in social work and hopes to work with transgender children and their families when he graduates.

Zach says it was a rocker named Joe Stevens who really “saved my life.” Stevens’s band, Coyote Grace, was opening for the Indigo Girls in Lowell and the 16-year-old triplets and their mom got tickets.

Between songs, Stevens told the audience that he was transgender. After the concert, Zach spoke to him. “He was the first transgender person I’d met. It was a defining point of my life. I realized I could be a boy and could have a life,” he says.

Shortly after that, Zach met his boyfriend on a transgender website. They’ve been together three years. Skailer Qvistgaard is from California and a junior at Boston University. Like Zach, he was also born a girl.

Grace Kerr sometimes jokes with her family that “Amanda was not that great. Zach is awesome.” What she means is that her son is finally happy, and is helping others.

“I can’t even imagine life without Zach,” says his mother.

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