HE WAS BORN IN A WOMAN’S BODY.
NOW HE IS A SECOND-CLASS CITIZEN.

WELCOME TO AMERICA’S NEXT GREAT CIVIL RIGHTS STRUGGLE.

By Eliza Gray
On April 18, a transgender woman named Chrissy Lee Polis went to the women's bathroom in a Baltimore County McDonald's. When she came out, two teenage girls approached and spat in her face. Then they threw her to the floor and started kicking her in the head. As a crowd of customers watched, Polis tried to stand up, but the girls dragged her by her hair across the restaurant, ripping the earrings out of her ears. The last thing Polis remembers, before she had a seizure, was spitting blood on the restaurant door. The incident made national news—not because this sort of violence against transgender people is unusual, but because a McDonald's employee recorded the beating on his cell phone and posted the video on YouTube.

Transgender people are some of the least protected, most persecuted people in the United States. In a recent study of transgender students, nearly half said they'd been “punched, kicked, or injured with a weapon” at least once in the last year. On average, a transgender person is murdered because of their identity every month, according to the Transgender Legal Defense and Education Fund. In 2008, for instance, Angie Zapata, an 18-year-old Colorado woman, was bludgeoned to death with a fire extinguisher when her attacker—a man she met through a social-networking site—realized that she was born male.

Transgender people are regularly evicted from their homes, fired from their jobs, and denied medical treatment. Last July, emergency room staff in an Indiana hospital refused to help a trans woman who was coughing up blood, referring to her as “it.” More than a quarter of transgender people surveyed say they have lost a job because of discrimination. Transgender people are more likely to become homeless (at an average age of 13, in New York City). And then there is the obstacle course of inconveniences that reminds transgender people every day that they don’t belong. One trans woman told me her company requires her to lock herself in when she uses the restroom—even though it’s multi-occupancy—so she is acutely aware of making other women wait. In some states, a court order is required to change a person’s gender on a driver’s license. Many health insurance plans only cover procedures for one gender, so a person born male who transitions to female can’t get both a prostate check and a mammogram.

For some, these challenges prove insurmountable. Four years ago, Mike Penner, a longtime sports columnist for the Los Angeles Times, came out to the world as Christine Daniels. But, after a year and a half, unable to cope with the scrutiny, she changed her name back to Mike and returned to living as a man. A year later, she killed herself. Daniels’s story was tragically typical: More than one in three transgender people attempt suicide at some point in their lives.

But these are statistics, and people are rarely moved by statistics. In this country, civil rights movements have prevailed when they have convinced enough people that a minority is being treated in a way that is fundamentally un-American. For this to happen, people need to see members of a disadvantaged group as human beings before anything else. The gay rights movement, for instance, has made great strides in large part because increasing numbers of people know, or are related to, an openly gay person. For more and more people, gays and lesbians do not seem strange—but the idea of denying them rights does. Such a breakthrough seems unlikely for the transgender movement. According to the Williams Institute at the UCLA School of Law, there are only around 700,000 transgender people in the United States, compared with around eight million gay, lesbian, and bisexual people. They are invisible in a way that other minorities are not.

Until quite recently, I had never thought much about any of this. Then, I met Caroline Temmermand. It started with a simple reporting assignment: I wanted to write about speech lessons for people transitioning between genders, and a speech therapist put me in touch with Caroline, a 56-year-old employee of county government in Virginia. When I called, she invited me to a rally for transgender rights, and I decided to go along. On a cold day in February, Caroline picked me up at my apartment. Although she is six foot two, with broad shoulders, she has a womanly shape. She wore black pants, simple black ballet flats, a cropped jacket, and a long black coat with subtle fur lining. Her voice and manner were effortlessly feminine.

At first, I tried not to look too closely at her, as if scanning for signs of masculinity—this was before Caroline had had any facial surgery, and I thought I could see it in her face. But I forgot my awkwardness as Caroline launched into conversation. At that point, she had only been living openly as a woman for about nine months, and she was still caught up in the excitement of it all. I later learned that Caroline is like this with nearly everyone: chatty and eager to form connections. (She signs all her e-mails “hugs.”) She has a weakness for goofy jokes, which she uses to put people at ease—when calculating the tip at restaurants, she often cracks, “Ever since I became a woman, I just can’t do math anymore!” She is very emotional, with a tendency to cry at the drop of a dime. This may partly be because of her hormone treatments, but as I got to know her better, I also thought that perhaps she had wanted to live as a woman for so long that she was taking the chance to enjoy every aspect of stereotypical femininity. Her favorite movie is Message in a Bottle, a romantic weepie starring Kevin Costner; Caroline told me she cried so much that she had to see the film six or seven times until she made it all the way to the end.

The day we met, we went to lunch at an Olive Garden, to the rally, and then to dinner at Applebee’s, spending nearly ten hours together. She talked to me about her family, her relationships, and the process of transitioning from life as a man to life as a woman. At one point, she offered to demonstrate for me the voice she’d used as a man—which some transgender people might be reluctant to do—and suddenly it felt as if another person was speaking to me from inside Caroline’s body. After our first hour together, I couldn’t think of her as anything but a woman.

Caroline’s story isn’t exceptional, except in the way that every transgender person’s story is exceptional. In many ways, she has been luckier than most. But the more I got to know her, the more
him to a psychologist, who asked him to draw a self-portrait. Steve drew a picture of a girl. The psychologist warned Steve to keep quiet—if he didn’t, she said, he could end up in an institution.

In high school, Steve played football, ran track, and started to feel attracted to girls. He figured the urge to wear feminine clothes must be a passing phase. Although his grades were good, he couldn’t afford college, so, after graduating, he took a series of jobs that seemed to affirm his manliness, like construction and fixing up cars. When he was 19, he worked up the courage to go into a JC Penney and buy a blue women’s blouse. For a long time, he convinced himself that he was a cross-dresser.

One night at a club during his early twenties, Steve met the woman who would become his wife. They married less than two years later and eventually had three kids. On the outside, Steve was thriving. He had his own construction business and was working toward a college degree and learning to fly planes. But his family life was another story. Steve simply couldn’t see himself as a good husband and father. “I felt like I had an incurable defect,” Caroline told me. After seven years of marriage, Steve decided to leave. The children stayed with their mother. After the divorce, Steve gave his family all the extra money he had. He fell into a deep depression and for a period wound up living in his car. He stopped going to see his kids; his friends and family didn’t know where he was. Once, his friends found him sleeping in his car wearing a nightgown and makeup. But they never talked about it.

Caroline Temmermand was born Stephen James Temmermand in 1955 in southern New Jersey, the third of eight children. (Transgender people find it offensive to be referred to by their pre-transition gender, because they point out that they always were their current gender. Nevertheless, I will use the pronoun “he” for the period of Caroline’s life when she lived as a man to avoid confusion; but, to be clear, Caroline is now and has always been a woman.) Steve’s dad, a mechanic, left when he was young. His older sister Maureen remembers him as a typical boy—very skinny, always hungry.

But Steve wasn’t a typical boy at all. At night, he would creep out of the bedroom he shared with his four brothers and put on his sisters’ dresses, making sure to wake up early to change back into his pajamas so that no one would know. In seventh grade, a counselor sent the treatment of transgender people in the United States appeared both appalling and absurd to me. At some subterranean level, transgender people provoke deep fear and hostility in our culture. They complicate categories that many people would prefer to think of as fixed. One might think that, as the gay rights movement has advanced, transgender people would share equally in its gains. But, in fact, the mainstreaming of the gay rights cause has created tensions between the two movements, and at times the transgender community has been pushed aside. Transgender people clearly need more protection from our laws and society. But they can’t win these victories on their own. Like every minority group at the outset of a civil rights campaign, they will need the rest of us to take the time to understand their lives—and maybe even try to imagine ourselves in their shoes.

Caroline Temmermand, after and before her transition.
When Steve’s youngest son, Dave, was 13 years old, Steve resurfaced. His two older children didn’t want to reconnect, but slowly Steve and Dave formed a relationship. It was awkward at first. At the time, Dave was struggling in high school, and on one evening Steve made the two-hour drive from his home in Maryland to his ex-wife’s place in New Jersey, helped Dave with his homework, and then left before dawn to get back in time for work. He insisted that Dave go to college; and, after Dave was accepted to a school in Maryland, he moved in with his father.

In 2004, Steve met a woman named Diane through Match.com. Diane has wavy blonde hair, brown eyes, and a focused intelligence. On their first date, they met at a Borders for chai tea, and Steve scribbled diagrams on a napkin to show Diane how planes worked. It was, in nearly every way, a perfect pairing. They had both found professional success—Diane as a radio news producer in Washington, D.C., and Steve as a manager in county government. Steve was more even-keeled than Diane, and he liked being there to steady her. They built a happy life together, along with Diane’s two sons from a previous marriage. Watching Steve patiently help her kids with their schoolwork, Diane sometimes felt that he was a better parent to her boys than she or their father had been. Occasionally, she would tell him, “You are the best man I know,” which would make him cry, because, in the deepest sense, he knew it wasn’t true.

Yet as much as they loved each other, both Diane and Steve sensed that something wasn’t right. Although their sex life was mostly good, Steve would never initiate anything. “She wanted me to act like a man,” says Caroline, “and, in some ways, I wanted to be treated like a woman, too.” Over the years, Diane asked Steve to marry her five times, but Steve could never say yes. Diane also urged Steve to see a therapist, but he wouldn’t do it. After five years, Diane felt she had to end it.

Devastated, Steve finally forced himself to talk to someone. He chose a therapist who specialized in transgender issues. “I was hoping there was a way around it,” Caroline told me. “Maybe there is a new pill or maybe there is a new treatment, maybe what I feel is not really what I feel.” After a few weeks, the therapist asked Steve what he thought his diagnosis was, and, for the first time, he said it out loud: “Oh my God, I’m trans.” “My heart really sunk,” Caroline recalls, “because I recognized what that means to a lot of people.”

Transgender, transsexual, transvestite, cross-dresser: All of these terms mean different things, but most people probably can’t outline the differences. The most useful term, “transgender,” was coined in the 1980s and came to

Breaking Boundaries

“The challenge,” says Margaret Stumpp, one of the individuals featured in this gallery, “is to make people realize we are ordinary folks and in reality not that interesting.”

NOAH LEWIS; Queens, New York City; Age 34
Lewis transitioned while he was a student at Harvard Law, where he lobbied administrators to expand the school’s student health insurance to cover some transition-related medical procedures.

TERRY CUMMINGS; Montclair, New Jersey; Age 56
“I’ve had experiences where people say things to me that they never would have done when I was male—very subtle put-downs that you would never hear as a guy.”

Captions compiled by Margy Slattery
encompass any person who acts outside the social norms assigned to their biological gender, from a butch woman to an effeminate man to transsexuals like Caroline, who medically alter their bodies with hormones, surgery, or both. (Transgender people are mostly considered separate from “intersex” people, who are born with ambiguous genitalia.) Contrary to popular assumption, a lot of transgender people don’t have sexual-reassignment surgery, either because they can’t afford it (health insurance often won’t cover it unless the employer pays extra) or because they prefer not to undergo such a major procedure. Trans men are even less likely to get surgery because the process is so complex. (As one doctor observed to me, it’s “easier to dig a hole than build a pole.”) Perhaps the most important thing to understand is that being transgender has nothing to do with sex, sexual orientation, or genitalia, but is rather about gender identity.

Transgender people have been around since the beginning of human history, often enjoying greater acceptance—even reverence—than they experience in the United States today. The transgender medical revolution began in Germany in the early twentieth century, at the institute of Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld, a gay German sexologist, who oversaw numerous sexual-reassignment surgeries in the 1930s. Adolf Hitler described him as the “most dangerous man in Germany,” and Hirschfeld fled to France. One of his acquaintances, Harry Benjamin, emigrated to the United States and became the leading doctor for people suffering from a condition he termed “transsexual.” His treatment plan to help patients transition remains the prevailing standard of care.

For a long time, gay and trans people were equally marginalized in the United States, and so they tended to band together. But this all started to change with the rise of the modern gay rights movement, which began in earnest in June 1969, after the police raided the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village. By some accounts, the Stonewall riot broke out when a drag queen named Sylvia Rivera threw a beer bottle. When the officers retreated into the inn and barricaded the door, Rivera and others rammed it with an uprooted parking meter. After Stonewall, Rivera lobbied tirelessly to help the Gay Activists Alliance (GAA) pass a gay and transsexual rights bill in New York City—and got arrested for scaling City Hall in high heels and a dress. But not long afterward, the GAA dropped drag queens’ and transsexuals’ rights from their agenda.

In 1973, the gay rights movement succeeded in removing homosexuality from the American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM). At the same time, transsexuals were moving in the opposite direction, and, in 1980, transsexualism was added to the DSM, providing a means to obtain access to hormone therapy, reassignment surgery, and other treatments. (Transsexualism was later incorporated into the controversial designation “Gender Identity Disorder.” The entry is under revision for the next version of the DSM, to be published in 2013.) Susan Stryker,

Visit www.tnr.com/gallery/transgender for more about the individuals whose photographs appear in this gallery.
Margaret Stumpp; Chester, New Jersey; Age 59
Stumpp is chief investment officer for a subsidiary of Prudential Financial. Transitioning has been like “breaking through the glass ceiling from above.”

Stevie Tran; Long Island, New York; Age 24
“I’m not so much a boy, but I’m not a girl, either,” says Tran. “The only thing that I do know is the fact that I don’t know.”

Emile “Milo” Primeaux; Brooklyn, New York; Age 26
Primeaux was raised deep in the Bible Belt in Texas. “Before I transitioned, it was a daily struggle to wake up and feel completely juxtaposed in your own body.”

Jillian Weiss; Tuxedo Park, New York; Age 50
Weiss grew up as a male in a religious Jewish household. After her transition, dating was a culture shock. “The only place to go was nightclubs.”
the author of *Transgender History*, says a sense started to emerge in the gay community that transsexuals were not only different from gay people, but somehow inferior as well.

In 1973, Rivera was blocked from speaking at the ceremony to commemorate Stonewall. That same year, a lesbian conference disagreed about letting transsexual lesbian singer Beth Elliott perform there, because she was really “a man.” Janice Raymond, now a professor emerita of women’s studies at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, articulated one particularly radical anti-trans strain within the feminist movement, writing in 1979, “All transsexuals rape women’s bodies by reducing the real female form to an artifact, appropriating this body for themselves.”

Rather than challenging society’s accepted norms as they once had, the gay community came to embrace those norms, arguing that gay people were exactly like straight people in every way except their sexual orientation. That wasn’t necessarily a bad thing, but it left less space for trans people in the broader movement. “When things started getting more mainstream,” Rivera told the *Village Voice*, “it was like, ‘We don’t need you no more.’”

**About Three Weeks After Her Breakthrough with the Therapist, Steve Went to See Diane. They went into the bedroom, sat on the bed, and Steve told Diane that she was a woman. Steve’s deepest secret was out. She had finally come to terms with the fact that she was a woman and a lesbian; she felt that now she could marry Diane with a clear conscience. Diane was heartbroken to realize that Steve had lived with this secret for so many years. But Diane also knew she couldn’t go back to living with her former partner.**

Next, Steve told her friends. One of the first was Susan Shull, a high school friend whom Steve had nursed through a tough divorce. When Steve called with a confession to make, Susan blurted out, “You want to be a woman.” Since then, Susan says, little about their relationship has changed, except now they sometimes talk about clothes. Not all her friendships survived the transition: Some friends drifted away, and there were others Steve just couldn’t tell.

Then there was Dave. The thought of breaking the news to her son filled Steve with fear. By then, Dave had finished college and dreamed of going to med school. Steve was terrified to do anything that might throw him off course. So she waited until Dave got his acceptance letter and gave him a few days to bask in his success. One day, he came home to find his dad wearing gold hoop earrings, like something you might see on a 15-year-old girl. “I thought, ‘Oh my god, my dad is gay, whatever,’” Dave says. After Steve explained, Dave was shocked but supportive. But, a few days later, it started to sink in. “You start to realize that they are gone,” he says. “Whoa, I am not going to have a dad anymore.”

But the hardest part was always going to be Steve’s extended family. Steve and her siblings had been estranged from their father for many years, so Steve had mentored her brothers and sisters and sometimes helped out with money. She was afraid her siblings couldn’t handle the loss of a second father figure.

A planner by nature, Steve organized a family reunion in Georgia in October 2010. Before the event, she e-mailed everyone to tell them the news and then called each person to discuss it. After the last call, she

**Some trans women say facial surgery can be more psychologically important than sexual-reassignment surgery.**

got stabbing pains in her chest. Doctors kept her at the hospital for 24 hours. It was an anxiety attack, the physical aftermath of hiding herself for so many years.

When Steve showed up at the reunion, her sister Maureen recalls that she looked like a man in drag. At that point, Steve hadn’t figured out how to dress like a woman. She wore the wrong make-up and a satin evening blouse just to walk around during the day. Her hair was growing out, but she was washing it too often, so it looked frizzy. Steve brought everyone together in the hotel breakfast room. Her younger sister Judy, a devout Baptist, was upset. “God doesn’t make mistakes,” she admonished. Steve’s brother Michael also struggled with the news. But, to Steve’s astonished, most of the rest of the family accepted her. By the end of the weekend, Judy was giving her hair and make-up tips, and Michael came around eventually, too. After the reunion, her brother Jesse suggested her new name: Caroline.

In a number of ways, Caroline’s transition followed a typical path. Until recent years, most male-to-female transgender people did not transition until middle age and had often been married and had children. (Anecdotally, therapists told me that clients have been coming to them at younger ages.) The process usually begins with therapy. In March, Caroline began taking hormones. She developed breasts and her muscle mass decreased—she can no longer do the heavy construction work she did as a man. In April, she had facial feminization surgery, which raised her eyebrows and shrank the space between her nose and mouth, a procedure some trans women say is even more psychologically important than sexual-reassignment surgery.

Every week, Caroline also attends voice lessons at a clinic in Washington, D.C. When it comes to vocal adjustment, transitioning male-to-females have a tough time, because estrogen does not make the voice higher. And there is a lot more to speech than hormones. Men speak in monotones, using volume instead of pitch to emphasize different syllables, with their heads perpendicular to their shoulders, while women tilt and move their heads and speak in rising and falling pitches. Male voices originate in the chest, female voices in the throat. This is the difference between a man who speaks in falsetto and a man who learns how to really speak like a woman.

I watched from an observation room as a clinician sat at a computer that monitors pitch and asked Caroline to hold certain vowel sounds for as long as she could. To me, her voice sounded quite feminine, but Caroline was tough on herself: After one assessment, she guessed that her pitch was 145. (Anything between 145 and 165 is considered gender neutral.) The clinician reassured her: The real number was 198, very close to the average range of feminine pitch of 210–220. Caroline then read a passage selected to contain all the sounds in the English language. This time, her average pitch was 177, just above gender neutral. “I still can’t find my voice,” says Caroline, disappointed. She also had work to do on her laugh, her cough, and her sneeze.

Not long after her facial surgery, Caroline’s friend Justine offered to give her a makeover. Justine, who is 41 and works for a home health company, has only known Caroline as a woman—they met in a neighborhood bar. One Sunday, Caroline, Justine, Justine’s mother, and Justine’s 12-year-old daughter went to Ross. Justine and her mother pulled 40 or 50 items off the rack. There were clothes that Caroline would never have picked for herself: It takes years of living in a woman’s body to know instinctively what will look good on a certain shape. The four women piled into the fitting rooms. Caroline ner-
This spring, Nevada became the fourteenth state to pass a law prohibiting discrimination based on gender identity or expression, when Republican Governor Brian Sandoval signed measures protecting trans people in housing, employment, and public accommodations like restrooms. (The religious right has launched a major assault on what it calls “bathroom bills,” warning that they will turn restrooms into hunting grounds for pedophiles and rapists.) More than 130 cities and towns now have similar anti-discrimination laws. But transgender rights have hit snags elsewhere. The New York Senate failed to pass a gender identity anti-discrimination bill in June. In Texas, some transgender people could be prevented from marrying since a court recently ruled that marriage can only occur legally between people of opposite-gender birth certificates. In May, Tennessee’s governor signed a law stating that a person can only be protected from discrimination according to the gender listed on his or her birth certificate—a move seemingly designed to exclude transgender people, since Tennessee is one of three states that bans any changes to a birth certificate.

The Constitution’s Equal Protection clause and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibit discrimination on the basis of gender. But, over the years, the courts have disagreed on whether these protections apply to a person who is born one gender and presents himself or herself as another. In 2005, the 10th circuit ruled in *Etsitty v. Utah Transit Authority* that a bus company could fire a male-to-female employee, because it would be a liability to have a person with male sex organs using the women’s restroom. However, in 2008, the D.C. district court ruled in favor of a transgender woman whose job offer at the Library of Congress was rescinded after she told her new employer she planned to transition from male to female. For the first time, a court held that discrimination based on a change in gender is no different from discrimination based on gender. But, since the Supreme Court hasn’t weighed in, the legal picture remains murky. “In most circuits, it is at best an open question,” says Shannon Minter, the legal director at the National Center for Lesbian Rights. “We are nowhere near any national uniformity.”

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The decision was made to get to the most expeditious route to get an inclusive bill. But there was no question that the ENDA debate had exposed a rift. Writing in Salon, John Aravosis, a gay man, accused trans people of threatening gay rights. "When we are asked—well, told—to put our civil rights on hold, possibly for the next two decades, until America catches up on its support for trans rights, a lot of gay people don't feel sufficiently vested in trans rights, sufficiently vested in the T being affixed to the LGB, to agree to such a huge sacrifice for people they barely know."

When Democrats gained control of Congress in 2006, ENDA had its best chance of passing in years. But, before the vote, Representative Barney Frank removed gender identity from the bill, arguing the omission would give it a better chance of success. Hundreds of gay and lesbian rights organizations condemned the non-inclusive bill. But HRC initially stayed silent. For a time, Rose says, the group cut her out, refusing to answer her calls and e-mails. Then, according to Rose, at a meeting to decide HRC’s position, Solmonese argued that Frank’s incremental strategy was the fastest way to get an inclusive bill. After a divided vote, the board backed the gay-only ENDA. Afterward, Rose felt forced to resign. "There was never an intention of throwing transgender people under the bus," says David Smith, a senior staff member at HRC.

The gay-only ENDA bill passed the House, but died in the Senate. In subsequent attempts to revive the legislation, the gender identity provision has continued to be controversial. Mara Keisling, the executive director of the National Center for Transgender Equality, told me, "We absolutely do not support and in fact oppose any legislation that is not absolutely inclusive, and we have sent that message loud and clear to the Hill."

In 2004, HRC passed a resolution stating that it would not support any gay rights legislation that omitted protections for gender identity. The next year, the organization invited Donna Rose to be the first transgender person on its board. However, on the board materials, Rose’s gender was marked as “other,” a classification that signaled a lack of understanding. During the next two years, many people Rose met through her work for HRC informed her that they still weren’t comfortable with trans issues. But, in September 2007, HRC’s president, Joe Solmonese, agreed to speak at Southern Comfort, the largest trans conference in the United States. It was, Rose thought, a "high-water mark in terms of the recognition of trans needs by what I would call the professional gay organizations." Solmonese’s message was clear: "We absolutely do not support and in fact oppose any legislation that is not absolutely inclusive, and we have sent that message loud and clear to the Hill.”
On the Saturday of Easter weekend, Caroline saw the video of Chrissy Lee Polis posted on Facebook. She was at home recovering from her facial surgery and was still swollen, half blind, and on heavy medication. But she e-mailed friends to try to set up a vigil for Monday night. She got permission from the local police, bought a p.a. system, and persuaded McDonald’s to close the restaurant that night. Hundreds of people showed up.

Since her transition, Caroline has become an outspoken activist. The rally we attended on the day I met her was for both a transgender bill and a gay marriage bill, but Caroline and another woman were the only trans people I saw, and the young advocate leading the group had to remind everyone to mention the transgender bill when talking to their legislators. In March, Caroline testified in front of the Maryland House for a bill that would provide greater protections for transgender people in housing and employment. (The bill passed that chamber but died in the Senate, whose president, Mike Miller, told reporters, “I have senators that are not going to hire, uh, people with male sexual organs who wear a dress to serve as receptionists, OK? Um—how can we say to constituents, you’ve got to do this?”) “Now that she can be who she really wanted to be, there’s no stopping her,” Diane told me.

Caroline keeps a photo of her and Diane in the visor above the driver’s seat of her car. She shows it to me nearly every time we meet. “They don’t see each other often, but recently they had a meal together, and Diane admitted to Caroline that she was angry. ‘After I got that out, I wanted to lie on his shoulder. I didn’t want to lie on her shoulder, you know?’” Diane said.

This is the hardest thing about Caroline’s transition for the people around her, even those who have been nothing but supportive: Caroline gets to be the person that she has always wanted to be, but that means the person she once was is gone.

Dave also struggles with this change. Both he and Caroline told me that they miss their father-son relationship. Sometimes Dave gets frustrated that Caroline isn’t as healthy as she should be. “My dad really doesn’t exercise or care what she eats,” he says. And her personality is different, too. “The hormones make her really emotional, and it’s hard to be around a person who cries all the time.” For Caroline’s part, she feels a profound relief when it comes to Dave. He is engaged and has just finished his first year of med school. There, the students undergo a psychological evaluation, and she often tells me that Dave received one of the highest scores. For years, Caroline thought she was going to screw up her kids simply by being who she was, but Dave has proved her wrong.

While Caroline’s transition has, so far, turned out to be a lot less traumatic than she feared, no one should have to wait until they are 55 years old to begin living as their true self. For people to feel safe to do this, our society will need to build a series of legal and cultural protections for transgender people. And, at a broader level, it will need to reevaluate just how necessary it really is to define people according to what’s between their legs. This would clearly help the transgender community, but it might be healthy for the rest of us, too.

Meanwhile, as grim as the current reality is for transgender people in America, ultimately, in Caroline’s experience, I found cause for hope. The last group of people that Caroline came out to, after her friends and Diane and her son and her family, was her coworkers—the mostly male staff of a Virginia government office. By then, her hair was getting long, she had pierced her ears, and people were starting to talk. So she called a meeting and stood before about 80 employees. “You may have been hearing rumors… that I am going to switch genders,” she told them. “I am confirming those rumors are true.” They gave her a standing ovation.

MARI ROSENBERGER; Cliffside Park, New Jersey; Age 51 (left) A year after concluding a 20-year military career, Rosenberger transitioned while working at a call center. Her employer required her to continue to use the men’s room. STEPHANIE BATTAGLINO; Cliffside Park, New Jersey; Age 52 (right) An employee of a life insurance company in New York, Battaglino was the first person to transition on the job in the company’s 150-year history.