

Aris: We have a long way to go

Hello, my name is Aris, I am 34 years old, and I am a transgender guy. How did I come to this conclusion? Well, I knew I wanted to be a boy ever since I realized that there are little girls and little boys in the world. In preschool, we were all the same, and I didn't notice anything, I was just a little kid. Then in elementary school I started to understand that there was this difference: I am a little girl and they are boys. So that's when I started to understand that something was wrong. I started to wonder, if I'm a little girl what does that mean? What should I do about it? I started to like girls, I mean looking back, at that time I didn't understand what was happening and what it was all about. I thought it was completely normal but then I started to notice around me that to like girls you have to be a boy. At that point, I started to hide how I felt.

For years and years, I dreamed of waking up a boy so I could be free to like girls. Of course I never said that to anyone, but I always hung out with boys, I always wore so-called boy clothes. Of course I don't actually believe clothes are definitively for girls or for boys. Luckily, I have very open parents and they always let me choose what I want to wear. They gave me the space to choose freely: what I want to play with, who I want to play with, what I want to wear, what sports I want to play. I was never pressured to do ballet. If I wanted to learn taekwondo, they put me in taekwondo, if I wanted to play basketball they signed me up for basketball, if I wanted to swim, they signed me up for water polo. I wanted to ride bikes all the time, and they were supportive. I biked with all the little boys in the neighborhood and we generally did what little boys do in elementary school. Up until high school, that's about how it was. Fortunately I had and still have very, very open and accepting parents.

Until high school, I had accepted that I was a little girl. Okay, I didn't like it and I still wondered why I was a girl. I didn't understand, but I hid my thoughts because I understood that society had given me this role, that I was a girl, and that it was wrong to say I was a boy. Back in about 5th grade, I had introduced myself once as Aris and of course everyone believed me, because

at that age all little kids look the same, especially if a so-called biological girl is dressed in boy's clothes, no one would ever know. So they believed me and I felt very, very good about it. But my friends started bothering me about it,, asking me, "why did you introduce yourself as Ares? If you are a girl, your name isn't Ares. What is this? You are not a boy!" So, I started to see that all in all they are not accepting or open to all this, so I started hiding it. I hid it through middle school, I hid it through high school, I hid it all until 3 years ago.

As far as sexual orientation, I have always liked girls and that never changed. I had never had a relationship with a girl or done anything at all, not until I was 20 when I had my first girlfriend. As a teenager, I always hid my sexual orientation and my gender identity...Well, I didn't even know what gender identity meant and I didn't even know what sexual orientation meant, because we're talking about a decade in Greece when all you were likely to hear about lesbians was that they were "unshaven communists." That's how people talked about lesbians and gay men and how they were shown on television. I'll put it in simple terms just like it was done then: they were just dykes, and it was a bad thing, and gay men were a laughing stock. And let's not even start about trans people because in the years I was in elementary, middle school, high school, trans essentially only meant the trannies on Syngrou. So what were trans people? they were prostitutes. So I grew up getting all of those cultural messages. I never got that from my parents, but generally I see that the messages that you get as a child you don't just get it from your parents but your whole circle has an impact, so the whole society around you. Your parents might be great, but what you hear at school and from the friends around you has a bigger impact. For me at least that's how it worked.

I was bullied a lot because I always wore baggy pants and had a hip-hop style and never looked like a girl. I've been chased in the schoolyard, and had tomatoes and eggs and flour thrown at me because I just looked different. I've been thrown in a dumpster with my head upside down because the appearance of my hair was different. I have curly hair and I've always had it short. I've generally been bullied a lot about my appearance and how different

I've always been, so I've always hidden what I felt and what I was. I stopped thinking about it until my twenties when I had my first relationship with my first girlfriend. It hardly lasted a month but at the time it was everything to me. That's when I started to accept my sexuality, at least. Gender identity was still an untouchable topic for me, it was buried very deep. As things stood, I was a woman and I liked women. I was never at ease, of course, with the fact that I was a woman and I never liked being called a lesbian... not that there was anything wrong with being a lesbian. I understood afterwards why, because I wasn't a woman after all.

6. Well at 20 I had this first relationship and it was the most liberating thing that had ever happened to me. That's when I started to at least accept my sexual orientation. I was a little late in telling my parents because I was still scared, even though they had given me no indication that they wouldn't accept me or that they wouldn't love me. Finally I told my parents and everything was fine. I had prepared for the worst reaction even though in my heart I knew I would have the best reaction. My mom was like, "yeah, okay, I've been waiting for you to tell me for years. I've known since you were 8 years old that you like girls." So then I started to feel okay with my sexual orientation and I started dating girls. I had relationships, and I never hid the fact that I was a lesbian at the time, although again I never liked that word. I never said I was a lesbian. Instead, I always said "I like women" or "I have a girlfriend."

When I first came out as a homosexual, things weren't very open in Greece but I faced that discrimination and I never hid. I have been kicked out of bars because I was with my girlfriend and we kissed, nothing major, just one kiss. I've been kicked out of 3-4 bars for that, still I didn't hide and I never hide. I don't like hiding, but my gender identity issue I didn't face it, at all, until I was 30. From 20 to age 30 was a period of discovering myself. At 30, I decided to leave Greece, I decided to leave and move to Scotland to find, I don't know, maybe a better life, maybe better conditions. On February 26 of 2018, the day after my birthday, I took my suitcase and my ticket and I up and moved to Edinburgh.

In Edinburgh I started to see a different attitude in general from the people around me, not just in terms of the homosexuality issue, but I started to see...well, I started to see trans people, I started to be exposed to a wonderful new world where everyone was so accepting and so open. I would see seemingly men on the street, and I say seemingly men because I don't know how they identified, wearing skirts and wearing makeup and having painted nails and I would look around and I was the only person looking. But you know I wasn't looking in a judgmental way, I was looking and saying, wow! But I was the only one, nobody else. People didn't pay any mind and I started to see more diversity around me and at that point I started to feel ready to examine my gender identity a little bit, to see what happens. Because I wasn't happy, I didn't like being called a lesbian, I didn't like being called a woman, I didn't like having breasts, I hated them, and I always covered them up.

One useful thing about Scotland is the weather. I could always wear a sweatshirt that didn't show much of my body. In Greece, summers were terrifying because I had to wear a t-shirt, due to the heat. I went through summers in high school, especially when my breasts started to show, wearing a sweatshirt in 35 or 40 degree weather, because I couldn't stand the breasts I had. So the weather made a big difference in Edinburgh. At some point, after about a year of thinking about all of this, anyway, I started having some panic attacks and general anxiety issues, a lot of which I eventually realized had to do with my gender identity.

I met a very, very nice man in a gay bar in Edinburgh. He came and talked to me and somehow, without any explanation, he understood me straight away. We started talking and he helped me a lot, to finally see that yes I am transgender, and that it's okay. I don't have a problem, I don't have to hide it, I don't have to be afraid. The first thing he said to me was, "you're a very, very handsome boy, what's your name?" But he didn't hit on me and I felt so beautiful and so safe at that moment. And I opened up to this man. After that, I started going to therapy, I accepted the fact that I am transgender and started taking steps to start hormone therapy.

And I realized later, that was why most of my relationships broke down. Because I couldn't accept myself. Basically, I stopped having sex, because I didn't feel good about my body. Because as we all know in a new relationship you try things, you do new things, sexually. But as my relationships started to evolve, I started to shut down more, I started to hide my body even more, because when you are in love your partner wants to see your body more. That's the point at which I started to hide more. In most of my relationships I reached a point where I stopped having sex. I have never felt at ease having sex. I mean there have been very few times, I could count them on one hand, that I've felt relaxed and actually enjoyed it. I've always been tense, it's always been my breasts, my hips, my womanhood, getting in the way, so then I hide and stop.

12. When the panic attacks started I went to a psychologist and she helped me to understand what was going on. After a year of that, I set out to start hormone therapy. The thing is that abroad it's very, very easy to get referred for gender related treatment, it's very open. In the UK, there is free hormone therapy, free mastectomy, bottom surgery, hysterectomy, it's all free. The only bad thing about the UK is that it has a waiting list. I've been on that list since 2019 and I'm still waiting. So I went to my GP, because that's where we have to go when anything is wrong, you've got a toothache, you've got a backache, anything you go to the GP. So I went to the doctor, he said, well it's very simple what we need to do, he takes my details, he takes a questionnaire out there and he does my reference, he gives me a referral to the gender clinic which is free to go, make an appointment, talk about starting hormone therapy. The thing, like I said, before is that I've been waiting for my first appointment since December 2019. So I decided to go to a private clinic, which is not the cheapest option. Luckily, in Greece, I have friends who have gone through the process and it's pretty simple. Right away, you get a paper from a psychiatrist, you take that to the endocrinologist who then prescribes testosterone which you pay for. I think with public health insurance it's about 20 €, and that's simple. However, in Greece there is no free mastectomy, there is no free hysterectomy,

there is no free bottom surgery. The only affordable thing you have is the hormones. Anyways, I decided to go to a private clinic in Scotland because I couldn't wait any longer.

I reached a point where I realized that I'm 34 years old now and I felt that I couldn't wait until I'm 40 to start all this, that would have other health implications. The good thing is that I'm getting closer to the top of the waiting list; now the National Health Service is seeing people who were referred in August of 2019 so it's getting close to my turn. So the national health service will take over my hormone therapy. At that point I will stop paying and they will provide it for free, and eventually they will cover mastectomy and also bottom surgery if I decide to do that, which is something I don't want to do at this point because I don't feel that the technology is adequate. (άντικουιτ)

I started taking testosterone in August. It was very simple. Well, I should say as a disclaimer that one should always start hormones with the supervision of a doctor and by doing the proper blood tests. I say this because I know a lot of people who have started on their own and it's not healthy at all, given the effects of testosterone in general. When I started seeing an endocrinologist he prescribed testosterone to me and he administered the first dose because I chose to take an injectable. There are 3 methods of taking testosterone. There is the injectable which is available in a few different brand names that don't make much difference. There is also a gel form of testosterone which you put on your shoulder every day. As for the injectables, there is one type you take once every 3 weeks which is the one I have chosen. The other injectable is done once a month but it's a higher dose and it has to be administered by a nurse. I perform my own injections, in the thigh, alternating legs each three weeks. I am on my third dose, so the one I will do next week will be the fourth dose.

As for changes, I'm in my second month so I haven't seen all that many changes yet. I see a little bit of fluffy hair starting to grow where I never had any before. I'm not especially hairy, unfortunately I didn't get those genes!

My voice hasn't dropped yet– that usually happens after about five months. A lot of people tell me that they think my voice actually has dropped a little, but I don't notice a significant difference. Although my voice–from what I remember and from what I've always been told– has always been a little lower than the typical female voice; it's never been a high voice.

I have seen changes in my period.-Generally this happens with testosterone it takes a while but around the five month mark the period starts to stop.

As far as mood swings, a common side effect of testosterone, I haven't had any major effects yet. All I notice when it's approaching the time to take my next dose is that I feel tired, I have hot flashes and in general my mood is lower. I'm not all fine and dandy as usual. I don't know how much this will change as my testosterone levels go up. My levels whenever I've looked at my blood work are going up so the injections are doing their job. Yeah, it's also showing and from the fuzz I've started to finally get. However facial hair is typically genetic, you never know if you'll have a full beard or if you'll grow hair everywhere. The mother's side plays a big role genetically. One negative effect of testosterone is hair loss so you can experience baldness, again depending on your genes. You don't know in advance what's going to happen to you. In that sense it's a bit of a Russian roulette game you're playing with testosterone.

Another change that I have seen with hormone therapy and especially with testosterone is that I gain muscle much more easily and my body fat is getting redistributed. So I have noticed that since starting testosterone, I see more significant and faster results from, say, doing weight training at the gym. Not huge changes yet, because hormone therapy also requires a lot of patience. You can't compare your transition to anyone else, you have to have faith in the whole process.

Nowadays, I'm a little more aware of how I talk to women and how I talk to little kids. Before transition, I often talked to kids while I was out and about. Nobody minds if a woman on the street says hello to a little kid. Now I'm more

aware of myself and I'm more reserved when I meet little kids; for example I won't touch them or pat their heads because I've gotten strange glances from parents doing that. I'm also much more aware of how I behave towards women in bars, for example. Like, if I need to get by a woman in a crowded bar I might have used a gentle, platonic touch and then walked by. Nowadays I just say, "Excuse me" with no touching at all.

These days, especially in Edinburgh, I'm not usually misgendered. That is to say, everyone reads me as a teenage boy. I do feel I have to be a bit more careful so to speak. For example, when I joke around with my colleagues, I'm a lot more careful with what I say - I don't make any sexual innuendos in my jokes because I worry it might be taken the wrong way.

And now I wonder how my life will change. I can't do the same things and behave the same way because it will be understood differently. I had a customer come into my Starbucks job, where I work now in Edinburgh, and start fighting with my barista, because he didn't like something. I intervened and apologized to the customer but he started yelling, "Tell me who you are!" When I told him that I'm the manager he said, "I don't talk to women, I only talk to men." So I corrected him by saying, well, actually I am a man. He started laughing at me, saying you're not a man, you're not a man! So I threw him out of the store. In Scotland, you have the right to throw a customer out. Here in Greece, in as many customer service jobs as I've had, and in all the arguments I've been in, I never felt empowered to tell the customer to leave. The boss has typically intervened and appeased the customer, because, as they say, the customer is always right. At that time, I was read as a butch lesbian and I got different treatment. I mean, feminine women are typically respected more than someone who is seen as butch. I was made fun of and I wasn't taken seriously at all.

I also had a challenging situation with a colleague who I have corrected many, many times. He told me, "When I look at you, I don't see a man, I see a woman." I said, "I don't care what you see. I respect you, you will respect me

or I will take you to HR.” The thing is, in Edinburgh I have the right to file a complaint against him and I feel safe enough to do it. In Edinburgh, I have rights. I have rights as a trans person and as a worker and that's the main difference that keeps me there. I don't like Edinburgh , it's cold, it's dark, it's winter 10 months of the year, it's still dark at 9:00 in the morning and it gets dark again at 3:00 in the afternoon. But that's what I like about it: I feel human, and I feel like no one will judge me except, ok, some religions and their followers. I'm being counted. That's the main thing, and especially as a trans person, I am not questioned by strangers.

~~26.~~ I do want to move back to Greece so badly. I want to come back but I don't know what kind of treatment I'll get here. This respect that people have in the UK for the individuality of everyone I think comes more from fear of the laws, and legal ramifications for not abiding by the law. People are reluctant to hurt you because it's forbidden, legally. If someone says something that I consider transphobic, I feel good knowing that the law is on my side. . So they avoid confrontation in the first place, they tell you, “what you want to do is your right and I can't come between your rights because that's what the law

Well, as far as the bureaucratic issues are concerned, I want to change my name legally because eventually I'll have a beard, and if my passport shows a very old picture, has another name, and says female, I think I will have a little problem. So I will have to change it. From what I know, here in Greece you have to file papers and make a court appearance to change your gender marker, then you have to submit that court decision to have the authorities change your passport and your identity card. Female to male trans people also have to obtain a male registration number and that's where the army comes into play, since Greece had mandatory military service for men. I know many people who received army summons after changing their gender marker to male. And beyond that, if you have university records you have to apply to get them changed, plus everything medical. All your information.

So this is a long process. You have to pay lawyers and appear in court and then months later you get the decision. Then you have to go through a whole process of running around, to different bureaucratic departments. I'm going to have to do that at some point and I'm going to have to travel here to Greece and handle it. In the UK there is a document called a deed poll. You log onto the UK government website and you download the file, you print it out, and it's sort of like an affidavit that says "I declare that as of this date I am legally using this name and that my old name was such and such, with the ID number such and such." You pay £50 if you want extra photocopies. You mail in this form, within a week you've got the paper saying, "yes, okay you are this name, you are a man or you are a woman, use this form attached to submit your passport and documents you need to change." That's it. No courts or anything. It functions like an affidavit. But I can't use this process because I'm a citizen of Greece. So I will have to come here to change my papers.

Generally, since I came out as trans I can say that I'm very lucky first of all with my family because they accepted me as I am. Okay, they don't use the correct pronouns 100% of the time, but they are trying. As far as my friends, I've actually gained friends. Such as people from high school that I never thought they would accept me because I remembered how they talked back then, I remembered their ideas back then, but of course we haven't talked in a decade. I never thought they would accept me but some of them have sent me messages and said, "I'm very happy for you," and they talk to me with my correct name, not making mistakes, and ask me questions they're curious about. A couple of friends, yeah, have drifted a little bit apart but that's to be expected. I actually like this opportunity to clear the air to see who's truly a friend and who's not, so for me it's an ideal situation. Thankfully the way I'm treated at work hasn't changed at all. I'm abroad of course in a country where the treatment of trans people is different than it is in Greece. When I came out, the people at work changed from one day to the next without making a mistake. Well, one colleague had a bit of an issue but we sorted it. It was also a

matter of his religion, so I can understand somewhat, but we discussed it and sorted it all out.

From the time I came out for the first time, as a lesbian, I was part of the queer community here in Athens. I remember going to Myrovolo then, and Noiz and S-cape. Of course these were places to go to have fun but there was always a sense of community and I always felt safe in these places. I created friendships, some that lasted and some did not. I met many of my girlfriends in these groups. I felt like part of a community and I truly felt like I belonged somewhere. I loved the feeling of belonging even though I didn't feel like a lesbian back then. When I left Greece I distanced myself from that community because I no longer felt like I needed it. In Edinburgh, I felt so safe everywhere in that city that I didn't need to feel like part of a community to find the feeling of safety. I made friends regardless of queer affiliation and I don't have any explicit contact with the community.

33. These days I also don't know what's going on with the community in Athens. I've distanced myself and every time I come back here I feel further and further away from the community. It's as if since I left, I've forgotten about it and it's forgotten about me. I mean a lot of the friends I had back then in the queer bars, now I don't even know what they do and where they are. I don't feel like I need to participate in a queer community especially living in Scotland. Maybe if I was still here in Greece I would still feel like I needed it. But there were also a lot of things going on before I left that started to wear me down in terms of the community.

34. I started to see a lot of homophobia within the queer community. A lot of judgment coming from a place where we're not supposed to judge anyone and we're all fighting for something in common and we all came from the same place. We're supposed to be united as queer people yet we end up calling each other names because so-and-so is too butch and so-and-so is too femme. Criticizing and making fun of each other. So that was starting to push me away from the community a lot, even before I left Athens. To tell the truth I

certainly don't feel like I want to be a part of a community that acts like that again.

Also because I now identify as a straight man I don't feel like I belong in the gay community. I'm not a lesbian, I'm not gay anymore. And I don't even know where trans fits in that community. In the beginning when I was first coming out as trans I found myself wondering, can I go to a gay bar or a lesbian bar anymore? I mean, of course I can go but I started wondering, since I see myself as a man and I see myself as straight I started wondering where I belong.

Now as far as Greece is concerned, the challenges are even bigger here because you always have to defend yourself. Society, at least in Greece, has started to be a little bit more accepting. It has started to accept that there is another side of the coin, that not everything is black and white, but I think we have a long way to go. Trans people here in Greece have always been persecuted, they have always been a laughing stock and now slowly society has started to come a little bit closer to acceptance. Slowly I see people coming out and I see laws changing, but there are many challenges. Say you're looking for work.. Some of my friends have told me about incidents early on in their transitions when they faced pushback from potential employers about their gender presentation or identity. Or, imagine someone who is being read as a man but he hasn't done his papers yet and has a female gender marker. He can't get a job because of that. Compare that to Scotland where you can make a declaration of gender identity and legally, you can't be challenged.

We have a very long way to go and we have to face a very big fight here in Greece in terms of rights for trans people. Even with the name change, right? We need to make it a little bit simpler and a little bit easier because I feel that they want to prevent me from doing it by making the process so difficult. It's a challenge to go through this whole process. And for another example, simply going to a gynecologist when you're a trans man. Anyone who hasn't had a

hysterectomy needs to go to the gynecologist routinely and that is a challenge. They stare at you, and I've heard people tell me that they go to hospitals and the staff use dead names, the staff call them by female last names and don't give proper medical care because they don't personally agree with trans people existing. I've heard extreme things and if you go abroad, at least based on my experiences in the UK, there's no way you will be refused treatment if you're trans. It's also a challenge to travel when you're a trans person who hasn't changed their passport because you have to explain to every clerk why your passport says something that doesn't line up with the person they see in front of them. The challenges all come from living in a society that doesn't fully accept trans people, in which even just walking down the street you're likely to get dirty looks if you don't fully pass as a binary gender .

