

Persistence

by Suzy Hopkins

Michael was born into a large Hispanic-American family in southern California. As a little boy he played with his toys and his brothers but his favorite thing to do was dressing up in his sisters' clothes. His parents discouraged this but he persisted. By the age of eight he knew he was a girl in a boy's body. His parents sent him to a counselor to get him to change his ways. When he turned 15 he decided he was going to live his life as a girl. His parents threw him out of their house. He was not to return until he was willing to live as a boy.

He lived on his own, changed his name to Michelle, had an operation, took hormones and lived in the sizeable transgender community in San Diego supporting himself.

When I met Michelle she was an inmate in the minimum security dormitory, for non-violent offenders, at California State Prison for Men in Folsom. (You are incarcerated how you are born). She was my new inmate worker who cleaned the Prison Museum where I worked. She greeted me with a big smile extending her hand for me to shake. She loved to clean like many women do. She was cheerful and hardworking – unheard of for an inmate worker. She was in her forties but was beautiful with waist length shiny black hair and definitely feminine. Every night in her dorm she was ostracized, ridiculed and harassed by her male dorm mates.

The female guards liked her but it took a while to convince the skeptical male guards to accept her. Ultimately they realized she was intent on doing her time and wasn't a trouble maker so they liked her, too.

We worked together for almost a year spending time talking like sisters. She was a sensible and realistic person. Since she enjoyed cleaning I convinced her to do cleaning when she paroled. Make signs. Hang them up around town. When she was set free she nervously went to her parents since you need to have an address to parole. By now her parents were in their 70's with many medical problems. She slept on the couch and made herself indispensable by taking care of her parents, shuttling them to their myriad of doctor appointments and keeping their house spotless. Gradually they realized what a good person she was.

She worked as an office cleaner at night. Her siblings eventually came around to accepting her as a woman and even called her Michelle.

I think Michelle won these battles because of her personality – cheerful, hardworking, sincere and forgiving. Hopefully for her the war is over.