

COLUMBIA MISSOURIAN

Living outside traditional gender definitions

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Shawn Wallace stands between two bathroom doors marked "Men's" and "Women's." Nervous, Wallace knows there are only a few seconds to choose a door before someone in this small-town gas station says something.

But for Wallace - born a woman, identifying as a man and living a life in constant transition - this small gas station bathroom somewhere between Columbia and Sedalia represents more than just a place to pee. This is an act of declaration. This is an opportunity to signal, to himself and to the strangers around him, how far he's progressed in the transition he's felt coming his whole life. This is his chance to show himself and the world who he really is.

But right now, this is a potty break, and Wallace has to make a decision. He pauses just a second longer in front of those two plain doors that are asking him to make a choice he still isn't ready for.

The instant you were born, society claimed your body. It assigned you a list of attitudes and activities to perform. It dictated how you could look and who you could be.

And it did all this by choosing for you one of two brief sentences: "It's a boy" or "It's a girl."

With three small words, the world transformed you - a human being - into a man or a woman, complete with a history, an identity, a checked box on a driver's license and a long list of stereotypes.

And a bathroom.

Safety protocols and economic considerations have divided public restrooms along this gendered dichotomy, providing a place for everyone on either side of the divide. So when transgendered people, or people whose assigned sex doesn't match their gender identity, advocate for gender-neutral and unisex bathrooms in Columbia, it's about more than a toilet and a sink. It's a challenge to the social system that defined, and, they say, limited, them at birth.

"The bathroom is just the epitome of the issue," said Scout Merry, advocate and manager at The Shelter, which provides services for victims of domestic violence and sexual assault. Merry, who was born as a female, feels like s/he doesn't fit in the black-and-white dichotomy of gender labels. "We're so limited by the binary," Merry said. "It's more of a fluid thing."

"I know who I am. Does it matter what I am?"

Merry asks this sarcastically, as though s/he expects the answer to be an obvious no. But facing the either-or options of male and female public bathrooms, Merry's gender suddenly matters.

"It becomes something bigger than a bathroom should be," Merry said. "It becomes a time of declaration. The days that it's hard are the days it's really clear that I don't fit."

In the spring of 2008, eight MU students, faculty and staff formed TransAction, a group dedicated to working for transgender inclusion. Wallace, an academic advisor in the School of Journalism and member of the new group, said potential goals include educating university leaders and Columbia residents on the risks for transgendered people in public bathrooms, like being reported to management, verbally accosted or even physically assaulted by people who "read," or interpret, their gender as the wrong gender for that bathroom.

Being read has a lot to do with looks: size, body hair, clothing. If a transgendered person doesn't look masculine enough for the men's room or looks too masculine for the women's room, confrontation can feel imminent. Merry and Wallace both said they feel the threat of physical force is greater from other men.

So far, no action has been taken by TransAction or other Columbia organizations to advocate for unisex bathrooms. Until then, a map of single-occupancy bathrooms on the MU campus that are gender-neutral is available in the LGBT Resource center in the Student Center.

The unisex bathroom in Main Squeeze restaurant and the single-occupancy bathroom in Middlebush Hall are also listed on Safe2pee.org, a Web site listing more than 1,600 bathrooms in more than 400 cities.

Those maps give transgender people the chance to find a place to pee without feeling what Merry calls "discomfort" from those who read her as the "wrong" gender for a gender-specific bathroom.

"I don't want to have to go in and explain myself," Merry said. "Right now, I obviously don't feel like I can explain myself real well. It's annoying that I have to be read at all.

"This is just me. Can I just go pee?"

Still stuck, Wallace looks around the gas station for a clue and wonders: How are other people reading me? What bathroom will they expect me to use?

He considers the risks. If he uses the women's when he is read as a man, female customers may consider him a threat. He could be called out and embarrassed or, worse, turned in to the manager. After all this effort to be read as a man, would he have to tell them he is really a woman?

But if he uses the men's room when he is seen as a woman, male customers may see him as a pervert. He could be threatened or, worse, confronted with violence. After all this effort to be read as a man, will he feel like a failure if it goes wrong?

Personal safety outweighs personal identity this time, and Wallace steps through the door marked "Women's."

When asked directly how s/he identifies, Merry looks away, uncomfortable.

"It's a road I don't like to go down, quite frankly," s/he said before rambling through a long list of adjectives: transgendered, male, female, queer, trans. Merry's identity lies among, rather than within, those words. S/he exists in a gray zone that is hard to define for herself, let alone to the patrons of a public restroom.

"There might be one definition for one person, but there's another definition for another person," Merry said of the word "transgender." "So by definition, there's not one definition, I suppose."

The American Psychological Association centers its definition of transgender on an incongruity between sex role and gender identity.

A person's sex and gender can be different. Wallace and Merry, whose sexes were declared female at birth, identify as having a male and not-only-female gender, respectively. In this case, sex refers to the physical state of having female genitalia, chromosomes and hormones, whereas gender refers to the socially constructed attributes and attitudes that are associated with one particular sex. The word "transgender" is used to describe people like Wallace and Merry, whose gender identities differ from their assigned birth sex.

Transsexuals, a subset of the transgendered population, are people who are transitioning from one sex to another. Transitioning can mean changing your name and clothing, taking hormone injections or seeking sex-change surgery. The abbreviation FTM is used to describe people like Wallace, who is transitioning from having a female to male identity.

The American Psychological Association estimates that 1 in 10,000 biological males and 1 in 30,000 biological females are transsexual. The number of transgender people who identify themselves in other ways such as transvestites, cross-dressers, drag kings and queens, and gender benders is unknown, according to the association, in part because the terms are so hard to define.

"You've just got people who choose not to live within the gender definitions that are out there," Wallace said. "Most of us have been raised that it's this way or this way. We don't have the words to put to another kind of idea. Until we get people more comfortable with the idea of 'other,' its going to be kind of confusing for a while."

For Merry, that confusion came to a head when s/he signed up for Facebook.com, a social networking site. After entering her name, e-mail and password, the site asked Merry to identify her sex: male or female. Merry's solution? To switch her Facebook gender identity as often as s/he chooses.

"In the term of 'transgender,' I feel like the trans," Merry said.

The door to the women's room swings shut behind Wallace. It's a single-occupancy bathroom, Wallace

notices with relief. Only one person is allowed at a time, so he doesn't expect to cause anyone else discomfort.

Seconds later, Wallace hears pounding and yelling outside the door.

"You're not supposed to go in there," he hears a frantic woman yelling. "You're not supposed to go in there."

Wallace is scared. He's by himself, away from home. He has no cell phone. No one knows where he is. The pounding gets louder.

He comes out.

"It's OK," he says to the woman waiting for him. She seems furious and afraid. "It's OK."

The commotion has attracted a man from behind the counter. He is big and threatening.

"You're not supposed to go in there," the man says, swelling with force.

Wallace wonders how he'll get out of here.

"You're not supposed to go in there."

"It's OK," Wallace repeats to the man and to himself. "It's OK."

Wallace makes his way towards the door and hears a gruff voice: "Never come back."

Wallace leaves. He feels intimidated and freakish. He never comes back.