Cameron Thomas Whitley and Eleanor A. Hubbard

Cameron T. Whitley and Eleanor A. Hubbard, the co-editors of *Trans-Kin: A Guide to Family and Friends*, have extensive personal and professional experience with the transgender community. They are also longtime friends, having met at the University of Colorado and worked together on several projects. Cameron, a transgender man, is currently working on his Ph.D. in Sociology; Eleanor, an ally of the transgender community, is a Senior Instructor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Together, they created this resource for SOFFAs (Significant Others, Family members, Friends and Allies) recognizing the need for a guide to help SOFFAs tread new ground in coming to terms with the transgender status of a loved one. The purpose of this guide is to provide a safe space for SOFFAs to share their own journeys, in some ways similar and in other ways quite different, from their transgender loved one.

Cameron, while working on his Ph.D., runs a transgender support group in his community. As an undergraduate at the University of Colorado, he founded TransForm, a student support and social group for transgender students. TransForm, as well as offering support services and a safe space to explore gender non-conformity, was a successful advocate for establishing gender-neutral bathrooms around campus. Cameron has also served as a board member for several non-profit volunteer organizations, presented at national conferences and engaged in consulting work, all related to transgender equality and inclusion.

Eleanor, semi-retired from teaching at the University of Colorado, was well known for her courses in sex, gender, sexuality, race and pop culture. She has also twice taught on Semester at Sea, traveling around the world and introducing students to how these concepts are different in different parts of the world. In addition, she is the Founder and CEO of DiversityWorks, a diversity training and consulting firm. She also has served on many non-profit volunteer boards working for equality and inclusion of marginalized groups.

Cameron and Eleanor connected in the early years of Cameron’s undergraduate career over a scholarly interest in sex, gender and sexuality. As Cameron and Eleanor worked together on a variety of projects, they had frequent conversations about transgender issues: sex and gender, body image and the representation of transgender people in the media, to name a few.
recurring theme in this dialogue concerned the difficulties trans people face in explaining their journey to the people they care most about and how the significant others, family members, friends and allies of transgender persons process their own journey when coming to terms with the transgender status of a loved one. It was out of these discussions that the idea emerged for an anthology to guide family and friends of trans folks through their own transition process. It all came together when Cameron and Eleanor discovered the term SOFFA: they would gather and document personal narratives, thought-provoking stories and the individual journeys of those with transgender loved ones. We have called these people Trans-Kin, the kinship of the transgender person.

Trans-Kin tread much of the same ground as transgender persons do: they experience an assortment of feelings as they come to terms with the transgender status of a loved one. This process is exemplified by their own coming-out experience where they divulge the transition of a loved one to others around them. As their loved one transitions physically, as well as emotionally, psychologically and spiritually, Trans-Kin often experience a need for a safe space to explore their own emotions and potential identity challenges. Our society has provided few such places. As resources grow and expand for transgender members, so too must the resources for their Trans-Kin. This is our intention for the Trans-Kin anthology.

During the final weeks of preparing this book for publication, we became even more convinced of its necessity, as we heard of cases from around the globe that spoke to the need of such a resource. In 2012, Tennessee State Representative Richard Floyd proposed a law that would ban transgender people from using dressing rooms and restrooms that do not match the gender on their birth certificates. He said, “This bill … is not personal, but it is intended to protect. I have a wife, three daughters, two grand-daughters, and there is no way, if some man thought he was a women ..., I would stand there and allow that.” Rep. Floyd came up with his proposed bill after reading about a woman in Texas who claimed she was fired from Macy’s, after attempting to stop a transgender teen from using the women’s dressing room. He said,

It could happen here. If I was standing at a (women’s) dressing room and a man tried to go in there — I don’t care if he thinks he’s a woman and tries on clothes with them in there — I’d just try to stomp a mud-hole in him and then stomp
him dry. Don’t ask me to adjust to their perverted way of thinking and put my family at risk. We cannot continue to let these people dominate how society acts. There is a potential for pedophiles and molesters to come into the restroom and claim the same thing.

The many ways in which Rep. Floyd is mistaken about transgender people will be addressed throughout this book, but for now suffice it to say there is no evidence that transgender people are pedophiles and molesters or that those who are, have used cross-dressing as a way to have access to dressing rooms. Fortunately the bill was withdrawn almost immediately.

The fallacies that Rep. Floyd articulated as a public figure are not uncommon in our society. These misconceptions specifically affect not only trans persons but also their SOFFAs. In fact, the generalized transgender person Rep. Floyd intends to assault is someone’s daughter, sister, friend or possibly spouse. This blatant stigmatizing, hurtful as it is for the trans community and their kin, also legitimizes transphobia by a person in power. This is a scary thought, one that reaches into the hearts of many SOFFAs, including the ones we were so fortunate to interact with in the preparation of this book. We have tried to give voice to the mother, sister or friend, worried every time their transgender loved one walks out the door, that their transgender loved one might be assaulted, even killed, by individuals who share a similar misconceived point-of-view as Rep. Floyd.

Another example: Govan High School in the UK allegedly kicked Jamie Love, a 17-year-old transgender student, out of class. Jamie, who was born male came to school dressed in girl’s clothing and accessories: tights, shorts, make-up and hair extensions. Jamie spoke to school officials about plans to wear female clothing, mentioning feeling “trapped in a boy’s body.” Upon Jamie’s arrival, school officials indicated that Jamie was troublesome in class and proceeded to ask Jamie to leave. Jamie’s mother said, “Jamie has done nothing wrong here. He has every right to express himself the way he wants and I will stand by him. Imagine the fear and confusion other trans teens experienced at Govan High School, and throughout the UK, as well as their SOFFAs, as a result of Jamie’s expulsion.

One final example: one of our original authors chose not to include her submission because she said, “The atmosphere is just too toxic,” in the state in which she lives. She was afraid that her son would be too easy to identify and placed in danger. Of course we agreed not to include her piece, but were saddened by her revelation. These three examples, out of the many we could include, emboldened us and renewed our commitment to Trans-Kin: Significant Others, Family, Friends and Allies of the transgender community.
At the same time, we are pleased that real progress has been made in our society toward a more equitable treatment of transgender people. In 2012, Jenna Talackova, Miss Universe Canada, was removed from the Miss Universe finals because she had gender reassignment surgery when she was 19 and was not “born female.” However, the organization re-considered, and Ms. Talackova will be allowed to compete, as long as she passes unspecified “gender recognition requirements.” Also On August 29, 2011, *Dancing with the Stars* announced that Chaz Bono, a F2M (female to male) transgender person and son of Cher Bono, was to be a contestant on the show. Although there was an attempt to protest his casting, he successfully found a large fan base, well beyond week six, when he was voted off. Transgender stories have also been featured in the last few years in *Newsweek*, and on *20/20, Oprah* and *America’s Next Top Model*. Other resources include a new book by psychologist Dr. Ehrensaft, titled *Gender Born, Gender Made*, which encourages parents of transgender children to allow them to be more gender-creative. We have included many such resources: books, videos, organizations and a glossary of terms at the end of this book, but the most important resource for trans-kin, we anticipate, will be listening and responding to people who are in similar situations.

Our intention for this anthology is to encourage Trans-Kin to experience their own transitional process and be strong in telling their own stories, which may be similar but are often different than their transgender loved one. Many such loving Trans-Kin express themselves in this anthology, but they also ask profound questions about gender, identity and social support networks, as well as the transitional process they are thrown into when their trans loved one comes out. We hope Trans-Kin and transgender people as well, will find herein a place of safety, a place to share common stories, and move through their own process. We dedicate *Trans-Kin: A Guide to Family and Friends of Transgender People* to our strong, dedicated, vulnerable and delightful authors.
"You're not a boy," he screamed at me. I was five or six, and yet I can still feel the power of those words rising from Paul's stomach and exiting out his lips. Paul and I were best friends. We were the same age and played together nearly every day during the summer. I told him to call me Alex and stop using my female name, because I knew that both boys and girls could be named Alex. On this particular day, though, something had changed. Gender made its mark on Paul, and we could no longer be the same: he established his position as a boy and pushed me forcefully into being a girl. Following his words, I erupted into tears and decided that I would never play with Paul again. I cried in private and never told my parents what had happened.

We all have "aha" moments, instances where time stops and something changes, something is realized or something must be let go. This was, perhaps, my first dawning moment. For some reason, up until that point, I did not realize that I would grow up to be a woman. Inside I had always felt like a boy and would eventually become a man.

After all, each morning I woke up to meet my father in the bathroom, as he smeared shaving cream on our faces. Then he took the dull side of his razor and ran it over my face clearing the shaving cream away. "Dad, someday I'm going to have my own razor and shave all the time," I asserted with pride. He looked at me and smiled with a little chuckle never challenging my gender identity.

It was the mid 80s. I was the typical tomboy. I loved sports and my GI Joes, hated dresses and enjoyed spending time with my dad in the garage. However, I also enjoyed playing with Barbies and working on creative projects with my mom. At that point, I didn't even realize what it meant to be a boy or a girl (I'm not so sure that I fully understand these categories now). But what I did know was that if I was a boy, I wouldn't have to wear dresses and I could have short hair. Beyond these things, at such a young age, I didn't see much difference. My parents believed, and I was taught from a young age that a girl could do or be anything she wanted. My parents placed few restrictions on my interests and let me wear boys' clothes to school. As I grew older and classmates taunted me, my home was a place of refuge, and my mother was my inspiration and closest friend.

Still, neither my parents nor any of my friends knew my deepest secret. One of my earliest memories is praying to God that he would change me into a boy. While we didn't attend church that often, I had been taught, "God answers prayers." If that were the case, if God really did listen and answer our
prayers, he would hear my plea and change me into a boy. I knew that as a boy, I could have a girlfriend, and I liked girls. I had yet to understand the difference between sexual orientation and gender identity, but still each night, I would start with my standard prayer of “Now I lay me down to sleep …” followed by an extensive prayer to end my suffering and transform me into a boy.

“God, I know that lots of people are suffering, but I really want to be a boy, and I know you can make me into one. I promise to be really good. Please change me into a boy tonight…” Because I knew that my prayer was not normal and that other kids my age were not wishing for the same thing, I never mentioned these prayers to my family although I confided in a few friends while playing childhood games, so that when we played house, they would let me be the dad or brother.

Yet, each morning, I awoke to my same body, the same confusion and unable to find a place for kids like me. I kept asking myself, “Where does someone like me fit in?” When no answer came, I attempted suicide during my senior year in high school. I couldn’t manage the depression, confusion and anxiety that I lived with on a daily basis.

I could not resolve my gender and sexual orientation confusion. It was even too much to think about being gay. I knew that I was attracted to women, but I continued to date men and some women. I prayed that my attraction to women was only a phase that would eventually resolve itself when I found the “right” man. Truthfully, I didn’t feel gay; I just felt that I was meant to be a boy and that somehow God had mixed up the packaging. While I had lots of gay friends in high school, our perceptions of our bodies and attractions didn’t seem to match. My gay friends didn’t share the same mind and body disconnect that I had felt from such a young age.

My life wasn’t easy growing up in a small western town with a population of less than thirty thousand. My local library did not own any transgender texts, and my family, like most families then, did not have Internet access. So I watched daytime television and saw transsexuals sensationalized, carnival characters parading around on a public stage for the amusement of the audience. Then I met my first transgender friend, Helen. This encounter was a breath of fresh air for me. Helen was not like the transsexuals I had seen on TV, but a successful, brilliant, talented and beautiful woman. We became instant friends, as she freely shared information about her transgender journey. I was intrigued. Never had I heard someone express the same feelings and internal struggles that were my unique burden. It was as if the missing piece of my identity puzzle was found. I came out to myself as a transgender guy as an eighteen-year-old fledgling in college. While I had always had “boy feelings,” I now had a word for how my mind and emotions were disconnected from my body.
In college, I was able to network socially with other gender non-conforming friends, and I was able to find my story on numerous websites and recognize the normality of my experience as expressed by others. Now, more than 10 years later, it is clear that the environment for transgender individuals has changed significantly; there are many more resources available for transgender people and their transitional journey.

Two years passed from the time I came out to myself as a transgender man and the moment when I revealed this fact to my family. My father passed away when I was 11, and my relationship with my mother was extremely important. I wanted to be open and honest with her, while providing her resources to face the jagged road that my identity would place her on. Coming out to my mother was not an easy process. We struggled together. So, I searched for parallel stories about her future journey, a map, as one of the authors in this anthology suggests. Alas, I found nothing. I could not find a source that would allay her fears, or a group that would help her process her emotions. I felt like a failure. I could not provide a resource for my mother, the woman who had spent her entire life providing for my needs and cultivating my creative curiosity. At the time, she had become comfortable with my identity as queer, but the shock of my transgender status was a second numbing blow. Although, the journey has not been easy for her, she continues to delight in her son’s newfound freedom, passion for life and renewed determination.

“It was as if the missing piece of my identity puzzle was found.”

In college, I was fortunate to not only come to terms with my transgender identity, but to also find a mentor and friend in Eleanor. Initially as my professor, Eleanor created a classroom where my identity and perspective was valid. She encouraged my self-exploration and supported me in my undergraduate honors thesis where the idea for this book was able to unfold. Over the years, we have remained close, sharing moments of great joy and times of struggle. Eleanor has always been one of my biggest supporters, cheerleaders and allies. For that and so much more, I am truly grateful. As I developed my voice as a transgender man, I enjoyed community education and transgender advocacy. I spent time cultivating relationships, serving on various non-profit boards, conducting transgender 101 workshops and writing pieces
for a number of books. In the depth of my heart, I did this for my mother and for the thousands of mothers like mine who fear for the safety and future of their transgender children.

While I continue to run support groups, respond to speaking requests and support organizations in providing safe and affirming environments for transgender individuals and their SOFFAs, my life is awkwardly typical. I always dreamed of this moment, when my presence as a man would not be questioned, and now here it is. It has been well over 10 years since I publically came out as a transgender man and started this profoundly amazing journey. My physical transition ended years ago. Rarely do I consider my transgender status or the fact that I was not born with a male body. It does not come up in daily conversations, nor do most people around me even know. However, my mother still encounters times when she must contemplate ‘coming out’ as the mother of a transgender son. My transgender status is not something that I try to keep secret, but it is no longer the center of my life. Today, my life is filled with a bounty of wonderful friends, a loving and supportive family, a rescue Yorkie (Pal), and a beautiful wife who shares my passion for living and desire to create change.

“The Archer’s Violin” by Autumn Yamamoto © 2012
Eleanor’s Story:
An Ally From the Classroom

I am a 70 + year old grandmother, as well as a retired teacher. I have not worn a dress, skirt or high heels in at least four decades, because I prefer comfortable clothes and shoes. I also prefer a short haircut that requires little or no work to maintain. In the last few years, I am on occasion addressed as sir, particularly if a person approaches me from behind. Even though the person is usually embarrassed and apologizes, I enjoy confusing others about gender. One reason is that I am confident I am a woman, even though I usually present myself as androgynous and often break feminine societal norms. Nobody seems to care how I present myself; this is not true for my good friend and colleague, Cameron.

I taught gender studies in the Sociology Department at the University of Colorado at Boulder for 20 years until I retired in 2006. During those years, I learned a great deal (I thought) about transgender issues. I often invited Terri, a M2F (male-to-female) post-operative transgender person to speak to my class. She would tell my students that from a very early age, she felt like a woman, trapped in the body of a man. Terri openly discussed her counseling, cross-dressing, hormone replacement therapy and costly operations she undertook to align her body with her perceived gender.

Terri was a beautiful woman, who emphasized her curves in her attire. She wore stilettos, and in almost every way, presented herself as more feminine than I ever have. Still in order to achieve her feminine persona, Terri experienced severe suffering not only in the hormone treatments and surgical interventions, but also in her family, work, and personal relationships. She lived in constant fear that danger could be around any corner because transgender people are at more risk for assault and even murder, just because they live as the person they perceive themselves to be not as the gender they were assigned at birth. Life was difficult in many ways for Terri, but she felt fulfilled and contented that she was now the person she was meant to be.

Cameron was the next transgender person I met. He called me the summer after his freshman year at the University of Colorado, informing me that he was a F2M (female-to-male) transgender person and asked me to supervise an independent study of transgender issues. When Cameron walked into my office, he was definitely not my image of a man; he was short, skinny and smooth-faced. He could have passed easily as a young boy or a young girl; he was as androgynous as I. Now hormone therapy has helped Cameron achieve a more muscular body, a lower voice and more body hair, including the need to shave. He too feels fulfilled and content with his achieved gender.
Through the years Cameron and I have developed a relationship not only as teacher-student, but also as colleague and friend. Watching him grow and develop into the man he believed he was born to be has been exciting. Cameron has helped me understand more concretely about the gendered world we live in: the strict gender boundaries that transgender people transgress to become their true selves. He also shared with me the times he was assaulted for presenting himself as a man and reminded me that safe places for people like me, who mostly follow the gender norms, are often unsafe for transgender people. I go to the public bathroom marked women, for instance, and nobody has ever questioned my right to be there, and often if the line is too long, I go to the men’s bathroom, again without being questioned. When he started transitioning, Cameron did not share this same basic right. He was often harassed in bathrooms regardless of which one he selected. In those early years, he found friends and allies to stand guard outside restrooms, constantly in fear of how people would react to his presence.

Of course, Cameron and Terri provide only a limited lens into the world of gender diversity, and the transgender world is filled with a plethora of individuals and often quite different paths. Trans-Kin are also individuals who experience diverse journeys. I certainly honor and respect everyone who is struggling with loving transgender individuals. For me though, it was a no-brainer. Becoming an ally of transgender people, while learning about Cameron’s life and struggles and standing beside him, seemed very natural.

Still being an ally of any marginalized group is both rewarding and challenging. My curiosity is triggered by the stories of those who live on the margins, whether it is because of their race, class, sexual orientation, age or gender. As a sociologist, I recognize that persons living on the margins often understand our society better than those of us who “fit” societal norms. Because I have engaged in self-education and been taught about the processes and structures of our society by those who are marginalized, I am (hopefully) a better teacher and, as Dr. Ehrensaft says, a more gender creative person.

The first step to becoming an ally is about self-education, but more is required. Those of us, like myself, who may ‘play’ with gender presentation, but don’t identify as transgender, live relatively easily within societal gender norms and as a result reap benefits denied to transgender persons. Our families probably don’t disown us, and we probably won’t be fired for not dressing “appropriately.” Too often these things do happen to transgender people. My privilege allows me to transgress gender norms relatively easily, but it also gives me the opportunity to stand beside those who transgress with greater consequences. That’s what being an ally means to me: challenging gender norms by using my privilege to make changes.
Some of the ways I ally myself with transgender people: I share my understandings of gender and transgender issues with others who live inside gender borders; I confront social structures that marginalize Cameron and work toward more equitable treatment for all transgender people; and I speak out against media injustices directed toward people who live across the gender spectrum. My life is richer because I know Cameron, and because I am an ally of all transgender people.

“My privilege allows me to transgress gender norms relatively easily, but it also gives me the opportunity to stand beside those who transgress with greater consequences.”

When Cameron and I decided to co-edit this anthology, I thought I knew a great deal about gender diversity and the transgender community. What I am learning through the stories of SOFFAs is that Trans-Kin are also marginalized, only because they love the transgender people in their lives. The SOFFA journey, like the transgender journey, is often dangerous, confusing and confrontational as well. It is not an instant destination, but a forever journey: a process of reflection, coming to terms with, empowerment and coming-out. Cameron and I hope that in a small way this anthology will help to create a better-traveled path for significant others, family members, friends and allies and their transgender loved ones.
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