

RADIOACTIVE

What I Learned Living As A Trans Woman

by Shawn-Caulin Young

As a storyteller and a proud member of the LGBTQ community, accurate representation of my brothers and sisters is a priority of mine. Ironically, my career has been filled playing cisgender, heterosexual racists with violent tendencies toward minorities and women. In short, I'm the dude who plays the angry white guy. Because I'm neither heterosexual, misogynist, nor a hate filled Nazi, I've had to dig deep to find empathy for the characters I play. These are people who would judge and hate the real me. This is my job—to uncover the piece of me who is that person and live the truth of each moment as they would.

Growing up gay in the small town of Farmington, New Mexico, there were no out individuals to whom I could relate. There were very few LGBTQ characters on TV or at the movies. This was the 90s. I lacked role models. I felt confused, alone and misunderstood. There was this piece of me I couldn't understand and no one around to help. With a cowboy for a dad and an All-State linebacker as my brother, I believed the only way to be loved was to be like them. I was the constant focus of bullying. I was physically and emotionally abused because of the toxic masculinity that surrounded me. It was a daily struggle. My circumstance taught me that I must be as masculine as possible in order to survive. Anything less would put me in danger. Like others in the LGBTQ community, I had to blend in. This was how I became an actor—I learned to become someone else so that I was safe. I trained my voice to live in a deeper register so I would appear straight. In school, I made sure to walk the halls and run in gym class like the other boys. I pretended to be attracted to the opposite sex. I even forced myself to date and have sex with girls so that I could prove to myself, and to others, I was who I thought they wanted me to be. I worked hard to meticulously erase my truth.

By my early 20s, I was so tortured by my self-imposed prison that I struggled to live a healthy life. Substance abuse. Anxiety. Promiscuity. Depression. These were my feeble attempts at the pursuit of happiness. I finally came out after college but continued to live a double life. One person one day, another the next. When complimented on how unsuspecting I was, it was a sharp reminder of how much I hated myself. People said things to me like "I never would have guessed!" "You seem so normal." "I would have thought you had a girlfriend." I relished this superpower of masculinity. I was proud to be perceived as butch and not the weak little faggot I privately shamed myself for being. Looking back, what's so wrong with a man being feminine? Or a woman being masculine? Why is expressing outside a gender norm perceived as a flaw or weakness?

Thankfully, I caught the acting bug when I did. Otherwise, who knows if I would still be alive today. As time passed, I came to see that how I express myself isn't limited to a specific way of being. All expression is human expression. End of story. It's because of storytelling that I learned how to accept myself as a gay man... hell, I'm still learning. In the summer of 2015, writer/director Angela Shelton called me about a script she had written titled *Heart, Baby!* After reading it, and bawling my eyes out, I asked her how I could be of service. Initially, I came on board to help produce the film. *Heart, Baby!* is the true story of George Lee Martin, an African-American prison boxer who turned down his opportunity for freedom and Olympic gold to stay in prison to protect his first true love—his transgender cellmate, Crystal. When we started pre-production, I knew diversity was going to be the key to bring this powerful story back to life. I also knew we had

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a responsibility to find the appropriate actors to bring authenticity to the real-life people they would portray.

Born in the late 1960s with the given name Timothy, Crystal was raised by an extremely wealthy Evangelical family in Nashville, Tennessee. She was confused and disgusted by her male body at an early age and began living boldly and unapologetically as a gay man. By the time she hit her late teens, Crystal was living as an openly transgender woman. Her family was embarrassed and ashamed, doing everything they could to eradicate her “sinful and unholy ways.” It was said that they sent her to psychiatric treatment, conversion therapy, and military reform school. After being kicked out of each and every one, her family started paying her to act like a man. Alas, Crystal was unwilling to deny her God given truth. Her family countered by drumming up false drug charges for which she was punished with a cruel 50 year-to-life sentence. To make matters worse, they paid to have her booked under a false identity in order to protect the family name. Despite being abandoned and literally erased by her biological family, Crystal was a steadfast purveyor of love and a devout believer in the teachings of Jesus Christ. She knew that she was made in the perfect image of God. In 1993, Crystal died in prison due to complications from AIDS but her legacy of love, generosity, and undying faith continues to live on in the hearts of her fellow inmates and friends.

When it came to casting such a unique and colorful character, I knew we had to find a trans woman. We asked our casting director, John Jackson, to hold a nationwide search. After several weeks of combing the country, we uncovered a heartbreaking reality— only 10 individuals were submitted, most of which had ethnic backgrounds. Of the 10, only 1 matched Crystal’s real-life specs and she was unfortunately unable to convey her essence. I asked myself, “How could this be?” With award winning films like *Dallas Buyers Club* and prominent trans actresses in lead roles on hit shows like *Transparent* and *Orange is the New Black*, how could there be only 10 individuals submitted? Why weren’t there more trans actresses to choose from?

We knew this story was too important not to tell. Angela suggested I do a make-up test to see if I could pass as a woman. Reluctantly, I agreed. When Crystal’s friend Doc saw a photo, he immediately burst into tears. Angela insisted I play the role and I began to panic. “Can I do this? Is it ethical for a cisgender, gay man to play the role of a trans character? Do I even know *how* to be feminine?” I knew nothing of the trans experience, let alone the female one. After much soul-searching, prayer, and a lot of booze, I agreed under one condition— I live as a trans woman before and during production. It was the only way I could begin to understand the trans experience. Little did I know, this naive attempt to honor Crystal (and the trans community as a whole) would soon blow apart everything I knew of gender identity and push me to the edge of my own sanity.

I began my transformation in October 2015, approximately 3 months before filming was slated to begin in New Orleans. I had no idea how to begin my “transition,” so I started with the basics— growing my hair and nails. After only a few weeks, I began experiencing judgement from associates and strangers. They would stare at me with disgust, making comments like, “Are you feeling ok? That’s weird for a man.” Embarrassed and

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insecure, I apologized for my appearance by using my go-to excuse, “It’s for a role.” This was usually received with, “That’s... interesting” or “Good for you.”

As time passed, my hair and nails continued to grow, and I started implementing voice feminization techniques used by trans women. Knowing I couldn’t do it alone, I turned to famed acting coach Larry Moss (Hillary Swank, Leonardo DiCaprio, Jim Carrey), as well as faculty from my alma mater, The Hartt School (UHA). My various coaches patiently held my hand as we began to explore my life as Crystal’s. Next, I turned to Kandice Pelletier, Miss New York 2005, for assistance with etiquette and walking. Crystal’s friends described her as a pageant girl. Who better to teach me than a beauty queen? As I watched myself erase Shawn, I was met once again with self-hatred and a deep-rooted prejudice of the female expression. With my appearance changing on a daily basis, I found myself instinctively preempting most interactions with a disclaimer. This worked for a while, but once I began the next phase of my transformation, the gender paradigm I had built around my everyday life quickly fell apart.

Per Larry’s guidance, I began shopping for make-up, clothes, and accessories I felt Crystal would own. I became obsessed with her aesthetic. However, with every purchase, I crafted elaborate excuses to shield myself from ridicule and judgement. I promptly proclaimed that the items were for my girlfriend or a birthday present for my mom. I was so afraid of what others thought. What I didn’t see was that I was afraid of what I thought about myself. The subconscious self-judgement was just as harsh and persecutory as it had always been. I had spent so many years eliminating my “girly” behaviors that I didn’t know who I truly was. I isolated myself from my friends, and the outside world as a whole, to avoid feeling vulnerable. It wasn’t long before I spiraled back toward depression and substance abuse.

After interviewing a couple of trans friends, I discovered just how little I knew of the trans experience. These women are challenged everyday to live normal lives. They struggle to find employment, good housing, and access to quality healthcare— things I took for granted. I was appalled to learn there are no federal laws designating trans people as a protected class. More specifically, there are no legal requirements that they be treated equally as human beings. Federal hate crime legislation has loose protections at best for gender identity and only 22 states have any sort of legislation against gender discrimination. Our country is built to accommodate the white, heteronormative, patriarchal norms. There is little to no support or protections for transgender people in a country where all *men* are created “equal.” Is this the *land of the free* I was taught about as a child?

Upon moving to New Orleans, my experience quickly intensified. I started experiencing discrimination, degradation, and objectification daily. I felt an even deeper sense of loneliness and pain. For the first time, I understood the utter hell most trans people experience in order to be themselves. I vividly remember the moment the power dynamics shifted for me, when I lost my privilege as a white male. It was the evening before principle photography began and we were doing the final makeup test. When I walked out of the trailer, I was cat called by my own crew members, men I had hired just weeks prior. They didn’t recognize me, thinking I was some random actress with whom they could

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have a good time. It was only when they realized it was me that they got nervous and apologized. Was this because I fooled them into thinking something? Would they have apologized if I wasn't Shawn, their boss? I'll never know. What I did know is that I was no longer able to move through the world with the masculine privilege I once knew. I was alone in my new-found female expression. Even once the team knew who I was, I was objectified every time I walked on set. It's so programmed into our way of interacting with woman that we don't even realize what we're doing.

After we finished the test, Angela asked me if I would be willing to go out to dinner to meet my co-stars, Gbenga Akinnagbe (George) and Jackson Rathbone (Doc). She expressed her desire for me to go as my fully "transitioned" self. Feeling myself, I obliged. However, I was unprepared for the rude awakening that awaited me at that upscale restaurant in the Garden District. To be clear, I was in full glam— face beat for the Gods. There was nothing scandalous or overtly sexual about my appearance. I looked, moved, and sounded like any other Southern Belle out for a night on the town. However, when I walked into the restaurant that night, it felt like I had parted the Red Sea. I was terrified having all of this attention because I thought I was clocked. Everyone knows I'm trans! But I was wrong. I was perceived as a beautiful, cisgender woman out to dinner. In that moment, I felt the joy of passing in public for the first time. However, a night that started with friendly smiles soon took a treacherous turn.

While casually conversing at the bar with some of the crew, I felt a hand on my ass. I thought it was a joke. When I turned around to investigate, there was this Good ol' boy staring right at me. I was confused. "No one just grabs another's body like that without an invitation. Did I bump into him? I should apologize." That's when I realized he wanted my undivided attention. My mind raced. "Oh fuck... He's going to see my stubble, my Adam's apple... I'm not safe!" My heart pounded. As the anxiety took hold, we were called to our table. As we sat down to dinner, I could tell Jackson and Gbenga were uncomfortable. I was paranoid, worried our server knew my dirty little secret. Needing to escape the growing tension in the air, I quickly excused myself to the lady's room. Escorted by Angela, I hesitantly entered the restroom, terrified someone would scream or call the management. Instead, I was met by an overwhelming sense of community that doesn't exist in the men's room. Women were peeing with the stalls open, talking, and sharing makeup. It was this whole new interactive experience. I thought, "Fuck, I don't know how to be in this." Men rarely make eye contact in the restroom, let alone talk to one another, for fear of appearing gay. These women accepted me and it felt amazing. I passed!

At the end of the night, I left alone. Naively. While waiting for my Uber, two drunk guys in the street cat called me. I ignored them and pretended to be on my phone. They approached me and asked for my number, wondering if I was "looking for a couple *friends* for the night." I told them I was busy and had to go. They snapped. "Why are you such a fucking bitch? We were just asking for your number." The terror came rushing back. I hadn't experienced that sense of danger since I was a little gay boy being bullied in New Mexico. I briskly walked away and down the street. Holding back tears, I knew full well that they were following me. I obsessively checked my phone, praying to God that the Uber would come. I kept thinking "OMG. They're going to *kill* me."

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From that moment on, I did everything I could to downplay my feminine existence in public. Only on set or at home did I let myself fully express as Crystal. I created an additional persona to get through the day, that of an androgynous rocker dude. It was my only way to avoid constant danger. It felt wrong to be in the men's room as Crystal, but looking like Axl Rose made it safer. By this time in the process, you couldn't deny my transition— from my nails to my voice. I was frail from dropping over 20 pounds. I was moving and expressing myself in a very feminine way. When I would get on the treadmill at the gym, people consistently got off the machines next to me to find one across the room. I was kicked out of stores. "We don't serve your kind here. Get the fuck out!" It was like I was radioactive. I put a bandana over my hair and gloves on my hands in an attempt to hide Crystal. Without that additional persona, it was open season and I was a moving target. I realized this was something many trans men and women have to do everyday just to feel safe in public. I tried to erase Crystal just like her family did.

The only time I felt safe was in the hair and makeup trailer. These girls saw firsthand the emotional toll living as a trans woman had taken on my mind and soul. They were responsible for the hard work it took to get me looking my best. In 4 months, I had done what it takes many trans people their entire lives to achieve. I didn't feel safe around anyone else. Friends I had known for years were treating me differently. Anytime I tried to talk about it, I was met with blank faces. "It's only acting Shawn, calm down." No one could see that I was struggling with my sanity. I felt invisible. It got the point that I was confused when I looked in the mirror. I hated my genitalia. I started to despise my body. My penis represented everything that could get me killed. To cope, I turned to alcohol, cigarettes, and on occasion, prescription drugs. I prayed that it would get easier. I prayed that I would feel safe and supported. It never happened.

During filming, I started getting stalked. This man would stand outside the gate of my apartment for hours, waiting for the production van to drop me off or pick me up. I was so scared that I had the driver walk me inside. Now, not only was I getting harassed, objectified, and degraded, but physically stalked. I tried to be cordial. I was paranoid he would see the security code or push his way in. He would talk to me through the gate and ask, "Why can't we hang out and get to know each other, sweetie?" With a bar next door, it was always so loud and I would obsess that no one would even hear my screams. I would think, "If something happens to me, what am I going to do? Scream out, 'I'm an actor! I'm playing a part! Please don't kill me!'" The state of Louisiana lacks protections for trans people— this is a cold hard truth of the trans experience. I never told anyone about my experiences because I was afraid no one would believe me. Or worse, they wouldn't care. I felt what Crystal and every trans person must feel at some point, whether on a date or simply out running their errands. "I'm alone. No one is going to protect me."

Here I was living a double life, yet again. I was desperate to connect. Some trans individuals turn to social media, willing to take any attention they can get, even if it puts them in danger. Many are discriminated against at the work place and have trouble landing jobs. Most trans people don't have the money to combat the harassment or discrimination they receive. When I think about the trans women who lack the financial

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privilege or assistance to live their truth, I wonder how many did whatever they could to make money, to survive, to feel like they belong. How far must one go to feel safe just to be themselves? Most of society view trans people as mentally ill or choosing their identities for attention. They fail to see the human being underneath, simply trying to be the person they know they are on the inside. The person God wants them to be.

My experience living as a trans woman gave me a powerful gift— a shift in my awareness. I saw the harsh reality of how we treat one another as human beings and most importantly, how I treated myself. I learned that American society is tilted. Women are in a subordinate position and treated as if they owe men something. I experienced this condescending energy firsthand. If I didn't respond to a man's flirtation, I was stuck up, a bitch, a whore. There is this masculine idea that if you're not giving him attention, he's allowed to intimidate you until you act the way he wants you to. Men are taught that this is how the world works from a very young age. And so are women. "This is the role you play. You smile, you act sweet, you do what he says. Submit, Submit. Submit." We're taught that women are property. But it's like, that's your mom, your sister, your neighbor, your wife, your daughter. Any man that lived as a woman for a day, really fully as a woman, and experienced how tilted the world is, would never treat another human being the way we do. He wouldn't discount victims of sexual assault the way we do. For the first time, he would understand just how hard it is to live as a woman. He would know in his body what it's like to be harassed, objectified, and degraded.

My biggest takeaway from this experience is that every single human being, no matter gender, race, identification, or expression, has the right to live safely and freely, just as they are. This archaic idea that men and women act a certain way is fabricated bullshit. Nobody should be taught that the way they express is wrong. This experience also shed light on my own subconscious biases towards women. Because of Crystal, I came to terms with that little gay boy I hid away and erased. She taught me how to love Shawn. I finally found balance and acceptance of who I am as a person. I no longer judge my feminine expression but celebrate it. In all the roles I've played over the years, I was able to hide behind a character. Crystal made me stand face-to-face with myself. Thanks to her, I'm now a staunch trans advocate and proud feminist. I stand up not only for my trans brothers and sisters, but for all women and minorities. The American Constitution clearly states that everyone deserves the right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." This means an equal playing field for all. No matter how they identify.

After much thought and some powerful advice from my trans sister Stanna, I've concluded that the reason there weren't more trans actors auditioning for Crystal is not because trans people lack talent. Trans people are barred from making it in Hollywood because of harsh governmental policies, policies that force these potential artists to focus on day-to-day survival. They aren't afforded the same American Dream that is spoon fed to the rest of us. Our federal government lacks laws protecting transgender people from discrimination in employment, housing, healthcare, and adoption. Many states require sex reassignment surgery to simply change one's name and gender marker. Trans people are marginalized within the LGBTQ community, struggling to fit in with their own brothers and sisters. It's a harsh reality that our government, and society, are waging a not so silent war against trans people. Only when every American possesses the same

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civil rights can we can start living the true American Dream. A simple dream in which all can live as the gender to which they identify. A dream in which opportunity is rich and abundant for all. I will continue to support the trans community until my last breath. No one deserves to be erased by our government like Crystal was by her family.

Maybe the American Dream is dead? I don't know. What I do know is that it's time for a new dream. One where *equality* isn't limited to the privileged few.