

A long, cold walk: The mean streets of Edmonton are especially frigid for the transgendered community

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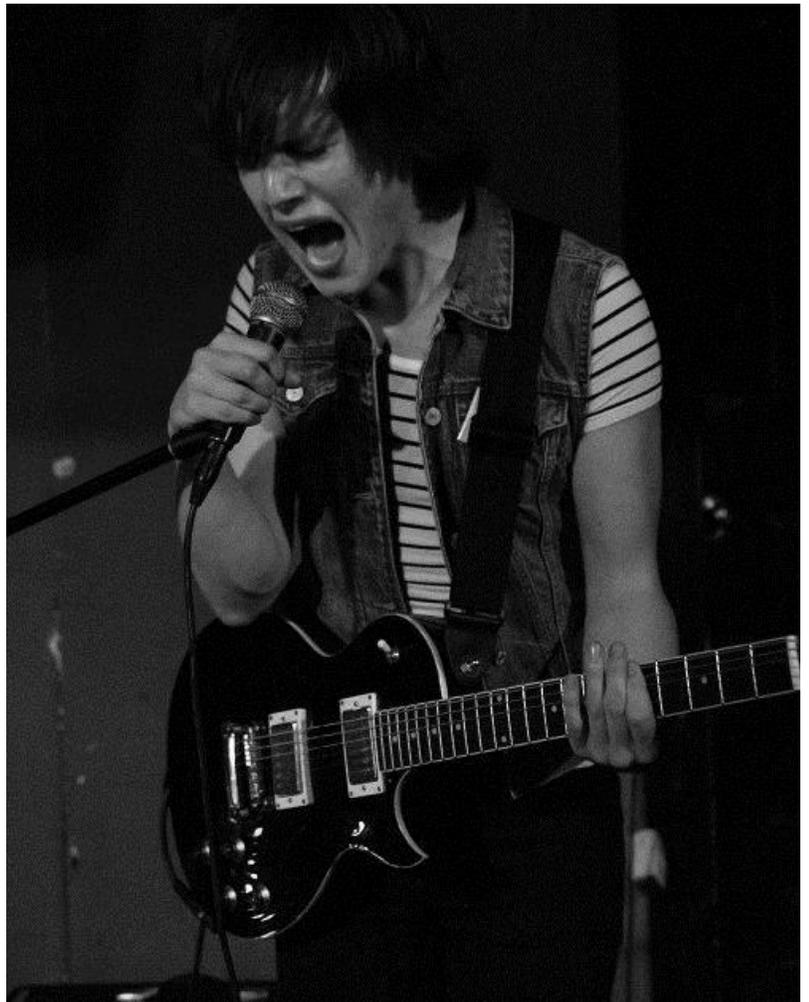
A long, cold walk

The mean streets of Edmonton are especially frigid for the transgendered community

By Mack Lamoureux

Cassia Hardy stands in front of a packed house at Cha Island, a bar just off Whyte Ave. She chose this island-themed bar as a place to raise funds for her upcoming tour of Western Canada under her solo act name of [Wares](#). At first glance, this bar with palm trees spotting the walls and pictures of reggae singers does not seem to be a good fit for her aggressive music. Yet, the smiling, dancing people bring warmth to the cold Edmonton autumn outside. Cha Island smells of fresh cocktails and sweat – both of which are in large supply at the show.

Hardy smiles and tells the crowd that she tried to learn “Hells Bells” for this show but just couldn’t get it down. The crowd voices their disapproval and repeatedly yells for the musician to play the song. With a sly smile as if



Transgender musician Cassia Hardy plays with raw emotion with her band Wares. Hardy is one of the better known transgender musicians in the city. (Photo by Mack Lamoureux)

she planned for this reaction, Hardy nods to her drummer and launches into the AC/DC classic.

The first time Hardy played Cha Island, her name was James.

Cassia Hardy is transgender. Although she was born a man, she openly identifies as a woman and makes no attempt to hide that fact.

Trans rights have recently been pushed to the forefront of the public mind. TV shows like Orange is the New Black, and South Park have been bringing the trans rights movement into our living rooms and forcing us to discuss it.

This discussion is a vital one. Transgender rights are immensely important, and we need to address them as a culture. [An Ontario study](#) by the Canadian Mental Health Association found that, in regards to the LGBT community, “20 per cent had experienced physical or sexual assault due to their identity, and that 34 per cent were subjected to verbal threats or harassment.”

***I'm rolling thunder; pouring rain/ I'm coming on like a hurricane/
My lightning's flashing across the sky/ You're only young but you're gonna die.***

Hardy has whipped the crowd into a frenzy. Nolan and Dustin, members of the band that opened the night, start banging into each other. They move to the music, forming a two-man mosh pit near the end of the bar, right beside the washroom. People start to join in.

Few people in the room know how close Hardy came to being just another statistic.

The most shocking piece of data from the Ontario study states that 77 per cent of trans respondents says they seriously considered suicide and 45 per cent had attempted it.

“I'm part of that statistic,” said Hardy.

“That more than anything has really showed me that I need to be as honest and as open with myself. For other people’s wellbeing as well as mine.

“I hope that I can one day be an example for someone, that you can leave the house and be whatever you want. You can express yourself however you want you.”

It is a common misconception that how you express your gender has something to do with your sexual orientation. It unequivocally does not.

There is a clear difference between sexual orientation and gender identity, says Kris Wells, director of programs and services at the [Institute for Sexual Minority Studies and Services](#).

“Well, we all have a sexual orientation and we all have a gender orientation. They’re two different things. Sexual orientation is outwards; it’s whom you are attracted to. It’s who you love.

“Gender orientation is inward, it’s who you feel you are.”

Most people are “cisgender,” meaning that they identify with their biological sex. For example, someone born male who outwardly expresses as a male is cisgender. However when one does not feel that their gender matches their biological sex they are considered transgender.

Another stigma attached to the trans community can be found in the pages of the [Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders](#), published by the American Psychiatric Association. The DSM is the book used for diagnosing or researching mental illnesses by everyone from clinicians to lawyers. It is the Bible of psychiatric textbooks. So why can you flip through it and see “gender dysphoria” – the term used to describe being gender variant – among such illnesses as schizophrenia, pyromania, and pedophilia?

Homosexuality was dropped from the book in 1980s due to lobbying by the homosexual community, but gender dysphoria remains on the list.

“Gender orientation is inward. It’s who you feel you are”

Though there are still obvious hurdles to overcome, Kris Wells calls the LGBT movement the “fastest moving human-rights movement in human history.”

Jan Buterman is at the centre of this movement in Alberta. He was thrust in to the public eye after being fired from his job as a substitute teacher at the [Greater St. Albert School Division](#) in 2008 because he didn’t conform to the Catholic Church’s teachings on gender identity.

“The Church says a lot of things about gay and lesbian people,” he says. “I was aware of nothing whatsoever of what the church had said about trans people, nor would I actually think that was relevant in a public-school context.”

Buterman was sitting at home when he received a phone call informing him that his services were no longer needed within the school district. Because of this, Buterman requested a letter of termination explaining why the Greater St. Albert School Division no longer wanted him in their workforce.

The letter, written by deputy superintendent Steve Bayus, stated that the school division felt that “one’s gender is considered what God created us to be.”

Five long years after his termination for not being the gender God created him to be Buterman is getting the chance to bring his case to the [Canadian Human Rights Tribunal](#).

“One’s gender is considered what God created us to be”

Despite being fired, Buterman says he feels he has otherwise not been directly discriminated against for his gender identity. Rather, he has repeatedly encountered a type of systemic discrimination. This type of discrimination isn’t spoken through the lips of

a bigot but arise from regulatory systems that Albertans deal with daily. While this can be a momentary nuisance for the majority of the population, it can be a major roadblock for a trans person.

“After being fired, I ended up being in a position where me and my children were homeless,” Buterman explains. “We weren’t homeless in the sense that we were living in a cardboard box, but we were couch surfing. That is a type of homelessness and there is a lot of that here in Edmonton.”

As a university student, Buterman was able to apply for student housing. He promptly did and thankfully, only after a couple of months, he was told there was a home for him and his children.

“I was so excited,” he recalls. “I still am excited to have a safe place for me and my children to live.”

In order to get into the house, Buterman had to undergo a routine criminal record check, and that meant having to deal with paperwork and bureaucracies – both of which can be a nightmare for someone who is transgender.

Buterman had to fill out a form to undergo a specialized criminal-records check for the subsidies housing board. He had to bring two pieces of identification with him just to get the form. Upon presenting his identification, the young woman working the counter told him his identification didn’t match.

“My name matched but I don’t think my sex ticks matched.”

See the white light flashing as I split the night/ 'Cause if good's on the left then I'm sticking to the right.

Back at Cha Island, Hardy has mounted her drummer's bass drum and is staring him intently in the eye. She rears her head back and screams the lyrics. There is no need for a microphone any more. Everyone is singing. Hardy's voice is lost in the mass that produce a noise greater than any one person ever could.

Cassia Hardy under her musical name Wares performs her song Come Clean in the Edmonton river valley. (Video by Mack Lamoureux) (Insert video in PDF)

Buterman went through his ordeal before the recent change in Alberta policy, allowing trans people to change the sex on their birth certificates without having to have gender reassignment surgery.

Wren Kauffman, a 12-year-old transgender boy from Edmonton, was issued a birth certificate that recognized him as male early this year. Before the [change in legislation](#), he would have had to lie down on the operating table and allow the surgeon to perform an expensive and highly invasive procedure.

With the help of Kris Wells and the ISMSS, this is no longer the case. The process is still long and arduous, but it doesn't involve scalpels cutting deep into the flesh to change sex on a birth certificate.

When the clerk told Buterman his IDs didn't match, she said she didn't think the police would be able to do a records check, which would mean that Buterman and his children would have to remain homeless.

"I told her that I didn't have any control over my birth certificate," he recalls "It is the way it is; it will be some years before I can have it changed. I'm sorry."

All because the sex listed on his birth certificate and his other ID were different.

“Those are moments when you start to feel pretty anxious, you know. Are my children going to continue to be homeless? That’s not a happy feeling.”

This happened in one of those government offices that call themselves “zero tolerance facilities,” so Buterman had no choice but to remain composed and try to deal with the situation as calmly as possible.

As he felt his chance to bring his children off the street slipping away, he explained that, as a teacher, he had had numerous criminal records checks in the past and this had never been an issue. Eventually, the young woman phoned the police to see if they could do a criminal records check. The police agreed to do one, and in the end Buterman and his children got a home. But while leaving the building victorious, he still felt a sense of outrage.

“I leave there going, How many young people who have never had to get a criminal records check and do not know this, or do not know to argue this, or had never thought about this, were basically told by a young probably inexperienced clerk that they can’t get a criminal records check because their ID doesn’t match.

“That is terrifying to me, and it is my understanding, from other trans people, again this has not been my direct experience but from other trans people who have been literally on the street, that it can be rather difficult to access shelter spaces if you are trans.”

***I'll give you black sensations up and down your spine/ If you're into evil
you're a friend of mine.***

The bartender has stopped serving and is leaning on the bar watching Hardy intently. Sweat drips off the singer’s face as she attempts Angus Young’s patented duck walk across the stage. She pushes her face up against her friends and kicks back into the refrain.



Studies estimate between 20 and 40 per cent of homeless youth delegated to the cold Canadian streets come from the LGBT community. (Photo by Mack Lamoureux)

Being homeless, and transgender is a significant problem in Canada. Far too often, a transgender youth is thrown out, and emotionally and financially cut off from his or her family.

It has been estimated that between 20 and 40 per cent of all homeless or street youth come from the LGBT community. If they are ostracized in Edmonton when the sky is dark and the snow rages, the young people have no choice but to find solace in a shelter. Even then, their problems are far from over.

“Some shelters may force young people to be in shelters according to their biological sex rather than their gender identity,” Wells explains.

“In some shelters that are still very much faith-based, they proselytize or they demoralize, or simply don’t accept our trans young people for who they are and, as a result, these young individuals will simply not go.”

Many trans youth in our city would rather roam the cold Edmonton streets than spend a long night in a shelter, and possibly face abuse. This can end with a young person finding warmth in the touch of someone who has paid to have sex with them.

“Imagine how toxic and damaging that is for a young person trying to find a source of support,” Wells says. “We know it’s a lot harder to get a kid off the street than to prevent them from getting on the street in the first place.

“When a young person is on the street, all of their risk factors start to amplify, whether that is drug-and-alcohol abuse or suicide ideation. That’s the sad reality of our sexual and gender minority young people is their suicide rates are at least two to three times higher than their sexual peers.

“That’s not because of who they are but those stressors are largely because of the environment they find themselves in.”

Hells bells, gonna split the night/ Hells bells, there’s no way to fight.

Finishing her set, Hardy tips over the microphone and makes her way into the audience.

The environment in Cha Island warm, and as the final notes of “Hells Bells” hang over the crowd, Hardy steps off the stage. Friends and family warmly greet the sweat soaked singer.

In a week, she will be in a Nanaimo bar, strumming her guitar with painted nails and singing her voice ragged through painted lips. She’s lucky. Her family and friends have accepted her gender identity and support her as an artist.



Cassia Hardy looks out at her crowd during one of her unforgettable live performances. You can find more about Wares at <http://wares.bandcamp.com> (Photo by Mack Lamoureux

“I’ve been so unimaginably fortunate coming from a place of such privilege, as far as my gender expression goes,” she says.

The reality is that, for every Hardy, there is a young trans person out there about to deal with the unforgiving onslaught of an Edmonton winter. There is another youth dealing with the stigma that what they are is deviant or immoral.