

Proud to be a different normal

16/05/2012 10:31:00 a.m.

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Mani Mitchell, now comfortable and confident in her own skin.

When a baby is born the first question asked ... "Is it a boy or a girl?" But what if it's neither?

*One baby in 2,000 is born with genitalia so ambiguous that it is impossible to tell if the child is male or female. Wellingtonian Mani Mitchell is one such person. In the film *Intersexion*, opening this week as part of the Documentary Edge Festival, Mitchell travels around the world to meet other intersex people. Mitchell spoke to Niels Reinsborg about the making of *Intersexion*, which won the Best New Zealand Feature Documentary Award at the Auckland festival, about her traumatic life as Bruce then Margaret, and about finally feeling comfortable in the skin of Mani.*

Today Mani Mitchell is comfortable in her own body, but it hasn't always been so.

Mitchell was born in 1953 with a vaginal opening and small male genitalia. For a year she lived as a boy called Bruce, then she became Margaret the girl, and at eight had surgery to remove her penis. Her clitoris was also taken because doctors decided it was too big for a normal girl. Further surgery followed on her ears and face so she would appear more feminine. She was never told why.

It was a secret not only kept by her own family, but by the small King Country town where she grew up. When Bruce became Margaret a meeting was held in the community hall to discuss what to do. The consensus was that nobody would ever talk about Bruce, and nobody ever did. But for Margaret the impact was devastating. She had horrific memories of her time in hospital and through her teenage and early adult life felt in limbo, detached from her body.

"I used to say I was a head that towed a body around," Mitchell says. "I was completely cut off and numb from my own physical body."

She described herself as a lesbian "because that was the best fit" but never had the

confidence to have a romantic relationship.

“My sensitivity and functionality had been destroyed.”

It was not until she was in her twenties that Mitchell got an inkling of the truth when she asked her mother about her birth.

“She told me about the maternity home and how when I was born the nurse bent down to pick me up and said, ‘oh my God, it’s a hermaphrodite’. I didn’t understand what an hermaphrodite was, but mum was clearly upset as she screamed those words at me. Then she looked out the window and said ‘better bring in the washing, I think it’s going to rain’ and never talked about it again.”

After her mother’s death, when Mitchell was in her 40s, she was looking through her own Plunket book. Sections of the book had been cut out and her name ‘Margaret Ruth’ had been sellotaped onto the page. As she flicked the page the sellotape fell off and underneath ‘Margaret Ruth’ was the name ‘Bruce’.

Twenty years ago Mitchell says she was a hard person - confused, angry and disconnected.

“I hit my literal wall and could have had a mental breakdown. I was wrecked by holding the trauma inside myself.”

Wellington grief counselor Dr Hetty Rodenburg suggested she attend a workshop being held in Auckland by Swiss American psychiatrist Dr Elisabeth Kubler-Ross.

“That workshop changed my life and gave me a framework for my own journey. I knew I couldn’t change what had happened to me as a kid – the shame and secrecy as well as the surgery – but I could potentially change the future. I decided to be who I am.”

Mitchell began growing her facial hair, the one thing the doctors hadn’t removed.

“The first time I let it grow was during a holiday. It was incredibly liberating and a very in your face way of saying to the world I’m different.”

And she’s used to the stares.

“Staring is okay. One of my heroes Harvey Milk said if we’re not out and visible nobody knows of us. The nice thing about Wellington is that I’m just part of the furniture, but I do need to be careful in provincial New Zealand.”

Today Mitchell works as a private counsellor, therapist and educator and is the founder of Intersex Trust Aotearoa. She’s described as New Zealand’s first “out” intersex person and came to national prominence when she laid her life bare in the television documentary *Mani’s Story* in 2003.

In *Intersexion* director Grant Lahood follows Mitchell as she travels to America, Ireland, Germany, South Africa and Australia to meet other intersex people. Mitchell spoke to 30 different people and 50 hours of film have been edited down to a 68 minute documentary. And edited well. As well as winning Best New Zealand Feature Documentary in Auckland *Intersexion* won the award for best editing.

Mitchell says the result is a heartwarming story told with a mixture of laughter and tears in the most frank and revealing way.

“Grant has a lovely low key way of approaching people and letting them talk in their own words. For many who had had the experience of being filmed and then cut and edited, and their houses turned into film sets, this approach was refreshing and led to people telling their stories in incredibly open and frank ways.”

***Intersexion*, screening as part of the Documentary Edge Festival, Reading Cinemas, May 18, 23 and 29.**