

GENDER PERSONAL

EXPLORING GENDER VARIANCE THROUGH ART



Zoë

Gender Personal
Interview

Acknowledgement:

Understanding Grows, Views Change

This interview is part of the Gender Personal project (2013-2014) created by Jacqui Beck. For an overview of the project, including its origin, visit www.genderpersonal.org.

The following is a transcript of two of the nine interviews done for the Gender Personal project. Seven people were interviewed once each, and Jacqui's son, Finnbar, was interviewed twice.

Since that time, the people who were interviewed have grown in their understanding of themselves and their gender. Please take this into consideration as you read.

Appreciation

A huge thank you to everyone who participated in this project, especially to those I interviewed. A more detailed list of thanks may be found at <http://genderpersonal.org/project-origin/#gratitude> (this link will open in your web browser).

Copyright and Licensing Information: © Jacqui Beck 2014-2018. This document is the work of Jacqui Beck. You are free to copy and redistribute it in any medium or format, provided you follow these license terms: You must include this copyright and licensing statement, and indicate if changes were made. You may distribute the document in any reasonable manner, but not in a way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use; You may not use the material for commercial purposes; If you remix, transform, or build upon the material, you may not distribute the modified material; You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict others from doing anything the license permits. The legal language of these terms is set forth at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode>. Compliance with these terms constitutes permission to use the material—you are not required or encouraged to seek permission from the licensor. [Rev. 10/01/2018]

Gender Personal: Interview with Zoë

[Note: Zoë is 11-years-old. Zoë's mom, Carolyn, was present during the interview and added some comments.]

1. How old were you when you started to experience your gender as different from what the world seemed to expect?

Zoë: Um, how do I explain this . . . it's a long story . . . when I was first like, um, [to her mom] how old was I? When you first sort of noticed?

Carolyn: Well, the first thing that just kind of made me think . . . was when you asked for a dress.

Zoë: And how old was I?

Carolyn: You were four.

Zoë: Ok, so I was four when I first asked to get a dress. And I asked my mom a few times, and eventually she . . . most of the time she just said "Yes we can," but we didn't actually do it.

But one time I asked and she did say we could so we went to Goodwill and we found three dresses, one of which my sister has now. It is still alive. Nothing has happened to it. But I did outgrow it [J and Z laugh] . . . by a lot.

So when we got home I immediately put one of them on, and there was a babysitter that night, and before my mom knew it we had gone to the park, and I was still wearing the dress. So I was sort of gender variant for a while, like that's what I thought I was, until about third grade.

Jacqui: What grade are you in now?

Zoë: Fifth.

Jacqui: And you're . . .

Zoë: Eleven. So I was, oh, I'm not sure, I think I was, uh, nine? Yeah, nine, and in third grade when I was sort of figuring out that I was not just gender variant. I was more, also, a girl. And so it sort of gradually changed. At one point I was saying that, in my class, it was something .5 girls and something .5 boys.

Jacqui: Because you sort of felt like you were something in the middle?

Zoë: Yeah. And something not . . . one or the other, and sort of in between. And at some point I kind of figured out that I was not a boy. I was a girl, and so two weeks before school ended I . . .

Jacqui: And now you're "two weeks before school ended" in third grade?

Zoë: Yes, I told the class I transitioned from Ian Aleksy to, um, Zoë Ian Alexandra Aleksy. So that went great. Everybody was totally fine with it. Then about the middle of the [next] school year we went to officially change my name. I missed some school, so that was exciting. Not much has really happened since then, so . . .

Jacqui: So, your wearing the dress thing was first, but I bet there was stuff . . .

Zoë: But it was sort of gradual. Bit by bit I more . . . from then, that first time—I was in about preschool then—till about third grade, I gradually, um, and everybody was ok with it, very luckily. I just gradually started wearing more stuff like that, and by third grade I had long hair, I was wearing completely girl [makes quotation marks with her fingers] clothes. Um, and so . . .

Jacqui: So for you it was kind of a . . .

Zoë: It was gradual.

Jacqui: Yeah, a gradual thing.

Zoë: So it wasn't a huge change because everybody already knew me, sort of.

Jacqui: And how cool. So, were you with the same kids, like third grade, fourth grade, even like first, second?

Zoë: Most of the same kids were . . . yeah. So, by now I'd say . . . more than half of the kids in my grade know. But sort of gradually the number just went up, 'cause it was first, when I told my class, only they knew. And then there were new kids in my class in fourth grade, and I told them, so now most people in my grade know.

Jacqui: You know, it's interesting talking to you because you're young. Some of the people I'm talking to are fifty years old now, okay? And they started noticing things when they were four, but they didn't do anything. Well, they did a little bit. But it will be interesting for you to hear their stories.

2. Tell me about your experience of yourself regarding your gender. How do you identify regarding gender?

Zoë: You mean how do I . . . what gender do I consider myself? Okay, so that's going to be a shorter, more easy question. So I consider myself to be a girl. A transgender girl.

Jacqui: And that's the words you use?

Zoë: Yes. And I use female pronouns: *she, her, hers*, so yeah.

3. How long did you know you were trans* before you came out, before you told other people?

Zoë: Well, specifically trans*, or the other?

Jacqui: Right, gender variant. Let's say gender variant—like something was different from . . .

Zoë: Well, not very [long] after I figured out that I was trans* and I was a girl, I came out and told my class and other people who knew me. And the same, I'd say, being gender variant—we pretty much told people it would actually matter for.

Jacqui: You weren't like on the street corner announcing things . . .

Zoë: Yeah, no . . . but just the people who we saw more often, that it would be important for them to know, we pretty much told right away.

Jacqui: How did that feel for you?

Zoë: I don't really remember 'cause I was really young at first and I don't really remember it, and I usually wouldn't tell people—my mom would.

Jacqui: So like, people are saying “You're a boy,” and yet you're wanting a dress . . .

Zoë: Well, not really . . . more just that they weren't saying “No” [about the dress]—just that, people were saying I was a boy because that's what everyone thought I was. And I did too.

4. Did you have an experience of being afraid to come out? Like, I know this is true about myself, but I'm afraid to show it . . . ?

Zoë: Um . . . no, not really. I've always been very . . . like, there are people who go stealth with it, but that's really not my thing.

Jacqui: Yeah, and it sounds like your family and your school were all pretty supportive of you.

Zoë: Yeah.

Jacqui: What about grandparents, or aunts and uncles, or anything like that . . . was everybody pretty good?

Zoë: Sorta more like, less so, but still somewhat, yeah . . .

5. How has your view of gender or your relationship with gender changed over time?

Zoë: Can you sort of clarify that?

Jacqui: Yeah, so what you believe about gender: male/female, boy/girl . . . How have your belief systems about what *boy* means, what *girl* means, what *gender* means, changed over time?

Zoë: Um, I don't know that it's really changed, 'cause I never really considered, like, my opinion of gender and those titles and stuff isn't really different from when I first was realizing that I'm not just a boy. So, that hasn't really changed . . . But I never really thought things needed to be in a box. I always thought, like, *this is just a way, something you can say you are, and that's part of your identity.*

Jacqui: And that's what it feels like inside, not what somebody else tells you you are . . .

Zoë: Exactly. Only *you* can know what it is.

Jacqui: During the time, like from when you were around four to third grade, when you decided—and if I use words that don't fit, clarify, okay? When you said: “you know what, I'm not really in the middle somewhere, I'm really a girl” . . . before that point, when you were sort of more, what you were calling *gender variant*, what's the difference for you? Did something change from “I'm gender variant” to “You know what, I'm not gender variant—I'm a girl”?

Zoë: Um, I think it didn't really . . . I didn't really change all that much. It was more like how I label myself that changed. I was still me.

Jacqui: So, you feel the same inside . . .

Zoë: Yeah, but just not the same . . . I mean, how I dress and my hair didn't really change at all. It was just my pronouns and my name.

Jacqui: What pronouns did you use in the middle part?

Zoë: Before? Um, well, I was always going by *he* and stuff, and then I switched to *she*.

Jacqui: At about third grade? Is that when you switched to *she*?

Zoë: Yeah.

Jacqui: And how were people . . . I mean, my experience is that people are more uncomfortable with something that they can't put in a box. I mean *she* and *I'm a girl* is easier sometimes than something that's not really defined—that intermediate place. Do you have an opinion about that? Was it hard on people when you said “Well, I'm sort of, kind of . . .”

Zoë: I wasn't doing that all that much . . . just a little, um, so I guess that didn't really apply.

Carolyn: When you were going by *he*, wasn't it kind of confusing for people sometimes? You'd say your name and they'd look at you, and sometimes they'd think you said Anne instead of Ian. So I think it was confusing to people.

Zoë: But not . . . she meant the . . . not saying “I’m a boy” or “I’m a girl.”

Carolyn: No, you didn’t say “I’m not a boy.” You’d actually say “I’m a boy” because at the time that’s just kind of how . . . Okay, I just wanted to add that, but you don’t have to.

Jacqui: Well, my son, when he came out he was seventeen, and he, to many people, looked like a girl. Identified as male, used male pronouns, had a male name, which he’s changed about fifteen times . . .

Carolyn: What’s his name?

Jacqui: His name is Finnbar. But because he looked like a girl to them, he would say “call me *he*” and they wouldn’t do it. And it was really hard on him, *really* hard on him. And, you know, because he wasn’t taking hormones . . . and people said, like one guy said to him: “I am heterosexual, I am attracted to you, therefore, you are female.” How do you like that?

Zoë: That’s ridiculous.

Carolyn: One of the kids in your class in third grade, when she said “I’m going to start going by *she*,” told the teacher: “Oh, this is going to be so much easier,” because they saw you and thought *girl* but you were going by *he* and so, for some of those kids, it made more sense when she changed the pronouns. [It was] hard for some of them to do that, to look at someone who looks female and say the male name and male pronouns, though. So some of them, I think, just thought that that makes more sense. It just fit better. So it was easier for them, for some of these kids, because it seemed logical.

6. Have there been any writers or other people who’ve helped you?

Zoë: What exactly . . . ?

Jacqui: Well, in the transition . . . Were there people . . . ? Like, for me, there some books that I read about gender variance and people who are transgender . . .

Zoë: No, not really.

Jacqui: How about anybody like a counselor . . . anybody you talked to as a family? Are you in any support groups or anything?

Zoë: Not really that much.

Jacqui: So just mostly your mom’s your support.

Zoë: Yeah.

Jacqui: Okay, great.

7. What do you want others to understand about how you experience yourself and your gender?

Zoë: Could you please clarify?

Jacqui: Is there anything, like, if there are people out there who just don't know much at all about being transgender, or any kind of, you know, like difference around gender . . . like, you got born and everybody thought you were a boy. And at some point you started to realize: *No, whoops, nope, I'm not a boy* . . . So this is just an opportunity to say: "World, here are some things I'd like you to know . . ." Is there anything that comes to mind?

Zoë: Not really . . .

Jacqui: How about when babies are born, or if you're parenting children and they look like a boy to you but they want to wear a dress . . . should you hit them on the head? You know, I mean is there anything . . . Like, were there some things your mom did that were good, or some things you wish she'd done that would have helped you?

Zoë: Well, not really . . . I think she did, um . . .

Jacqui: When you asked her for a dress, what did she do?

Zoë: I actually don't completely remember, but she did . . . [turns to Carolyn] . . . well, can you say? 'Cause I don't . . .

Jacqui: Did you end up with a dress?

Zoë: Yes, I did.

Jacqui: There you go. Some parents would never have done that. Do you know that?

Zoë: Yes. Ridiculous.

Jacqui: Your mom is pretty amazing. And I guess that's what I'm getting at... This is question eight, and this one's like: who knows the answer to this one... But I put it in here just 'cause it's kind of interesting. The question is:

8. What is gender?

Zoë: Uuuuummm . . .

Jacqui: Right . . . I don't think I could answer this. But if you have thoughts feel free . . .

Zoë: Oh! Well, it's confusing . . .

Jacqui: Do you think there are two genders?

Zoë: No. There are a whole lot more. You know how between this finger and this finger there are infinite points? I mean, there's here, but then there's here and here and so on. Same with gender. Like, there's here, which is completely male, and here, which is completely female, with infinite points between.

Jacqui: Yeah. And I don't know if you find this true for yourself, but some days I'm more here, and sometimes I'm over here, and sometimes I'm more here . . . Sometimes I really want to dress up and be girly, and sometimes I feel more over by the guy end. So even me, I'm not in one place.

9. What have you learned about gender and gender expression?

Zoë: Um, can you clarify that?

Jacqui: Sure. You're a girl. Gender expression—like how do you express the fact that you're a girl?

Zoë: Well, I guess sort of like, how I have my hair and just sort of that some of my interests . . . a lot of my interests are more boy types, and that's actually less so . . .

Jacqui: Are you comfortable with that?

Zoë: Yeah. Totally.

Jacqui: So that says something too. Like, what's a *girl interest*? What's a *boy interest*? We try to put boxes around that stuff.

Zoë: Not everything needs a label.

Jacqui: That's for sure. And it's kind of neat that you're saying: if you're interested in something, it doesn't have to be what someone else is saying is a *girl* interest. That you're comfortable with that.

Have you thought about hormones and that kind of stuff? Have you guys started talking about that?

Zoë: Somewhat.

Jacqui: Would you be comfortable sharing any of that?

Zoë: Well, what exactly . . .

Jacqui: Do you plan to take hormones?

Zoë: Yes, I do want to. Well, what else are you asking?

Jacqui: Well, if something feels uncomfortable, be sure to just say “No way.” So, there are hormone blockers that can postpone puberty—like you can take hormone blockers to put off puberty so you have more decision time. And then at some point you can decide about taking female hormones. So, hormone blockers if you want to postpone puberty, and then the option of if you want to take female hormones at some point . . . Is that something you plan to do, or think about?

Zoë: Yes, I do want to take female hormones, but I’m not as excited about having to wait. Because, about now is the normal age when puberty starts. And I don’t want to have to wait.

Jacqui: Is there some kind of rule about how old you have to be?

Zoë: Well, doctors are usually reluctant to do it around my age because they don’t know if the person will be sure of their answer, and some of the stuff is irreversible. But I don’t want to have to wait.

Jacqui: So, if it were up to you, you would not wait. Is that what you’re saying?

Zoë: Yeah. Well, I’d probably wait somewhat, but not really. Like, once it was starting to be in Tanner 2 [stage of puberty], then I would do whatever that would block that, and . . .

Jacqui: So you wouldn’t want to reverse things . . .

Zoë: Well, I wouldn’t really have to reverse things [that would result from male puberty] if I just waited until puberty blockers, but I wouldn’t want to wait . . . I would want to go through female puberty, or what I could of it, at a normal, or at an average time.

Jacqui: Yeah, I totally get that, yeah, absolutely. Like when your friends are going through it.

Zoë: But not have to wait.

Jacqui: I hadn’t thought about that . . . Going through puberty when your friends do . . .

10. Why do you think people are--and I use the word *afraid*--of gender variance?

Jacqui: You may not experience it that way, but it seems like some people are reactive about it . . . Have you experienced that at all, that people are . . .

Zoë: No, not really. I’ve heard about stuff, but it hasn’t happened to me.

Jacqui: Do you have a thought about why that might be upsetting to people at all?

Zoë: Well, ’cause lots of people like what they’re used to. It’s not very *normal* so it can be just that people don’t like how it’s different.

Jacqui: Yeah, I like that. And that's partly why I'm doing this project. I just want people to know more—not what I said to my kid which was like: “Really? This is so unusual.” And it's not. That's the thing.

11. How do people respond to you?

Zoë: What exactly do you mean by that?

Jacqui: What I mean is—and I think you pretty much answered this—like, you said people at school are pretty good. They don't give you a hard time. Relatives are pretty good. So is that pretty much it? Is there anything else?

Zoë: No, not really.

12. How do you wish people would respond to you?

Jacqui: So, I guess, I mean obviously if you were having trouble we could talk about that a lot, but it sounds like you're good with that.

13. What are the hardest things you deal with or have dealt with?

Zoë: (after a long pause) Well, let's see . . . (another pause)

Jacqui: Do you have any stories about stuff that's been challenging for you? In terms of school, or friendships, or anything like that . . .

Zoë: Not that much . . .
[Carolyn says something inaudible]

Zoë: No, we just didn't get along.

Carolyn: But he made it seem like it was a gender thing, right? He would say your old name . . .

Zoë: No . . . I don't remember that at all.

Carolyn: What about the thing at summer camp? At the Y . . .

Zoë: Oh, oh that. I thought you meant something before . . .

Carolyn: Was that hard or challenging?

Zoë: Yeah, but I don't want to explain that. That's too long.

Jacqui: Long is okay.

Zoë: I know but . . .

Jacqui: [laughing] You don't want to get into it.

Zoë: [to Carolyn] You're better at it anyway.

Carolyn: But you could sum it up in like two sentences.

Jacqui: Is it kind of embarrassing?

Zoë: Here, I'll do one: We had trouble and are still having trouble with the Y, because I was going to go to Camp Colman, but it's . . . we're having trouble . . .

Carolyn: What's their problem?

Zoë: I didn't want to spend a bunch of time talking about it . . .

Carolyn: Are you maybe not wanting to answer questions right now?

Zoë: No, I just don't want to explain about that because it would take a while to talk about it.

Carolyn: I mean, I think you could say it pretty briefly . . .

Jacqui: I have a question about it . . . Would you be willing to answer a question?

Zoë: Sure.

Jacqui: My question is: does it have to do with where you'd sleep and where you'd shower, stuff like that? Where you'd go to the bathroom?

Zoë: Yeah. Yes.

Jacqui: So they're saying, it sounds like, "Hey, we don't know where to have you live and do bathroom stuff . . ."

Zoë: Yeah, but they're sort of not completely . . . They're offering stuff that's not what we wanted . . .

Jacqui: So they're saying, "Hey, we can fix this," but then their idea of fixing it isn't very . . .

Zoë: Yeah, basically.

Jacqui: Yeah, 'cause that's an issue at schools and colleges too.

14. Is there anything you'd like to say to gender-variant people or people who wonder if they're gender variant, and that includes transgender people . . . or is there anything you'd like to say to any people?

Zoë: Just that the only people who can know if somebody is gender variant or transgender or genderqueer, or anything like that, is *themselves*. They're the only person who can really know. I think [about taking hormones] it really depends on the person . . . Like, I am sure that my decision would be the same, but people are reluctant to do it when they can't be sure and some of the stuff is irreversible.

Jacqui: It's a big decision, and you can see why they'd want to be careful, but I can also see that you'd be frustrated...

15. So, this is a question that's about you beyond just gender stuff: Just tell me a little about what makes you unique. Tell me a couple things just about you. Like, what do you like to do...

Zoë: I like to . . . Well, like my interests and stuff?

Jacqui: Sure.

Zoë: Well, where to begin? Let's see, I like *Magic the Gathering*, I like Playmobil and Legos and Lindsay [younger sister who is nearby] not being in my personal space. I like BMX biking and all types of biking.

Jacqui: Camp?

Zoë: Camps are fun. It all depends on the camp . . .

Jacqui: What about it? Like, you were saying kind of outdoorsy stuff. Do you like roughing it a bit?

Zoë: Yeah, I like boating and archery and, you know . . .

16. What are some of your favorite books or movies?

Zoë: Um, anything by Rick Riordan. Also I like the *Wildwood* series by Colin Meloy, illustrated by Carson Ellis.

Jacqui: Are these sort of adventure . . .

Zoë: Yes. Very much so, the Rick Riordan books, and yes, also, less so, but still very much so the *Wildwood* . . .

Jacqui: What about movies?

Zoë: I like a lot, all evenly, so that's less of an easy . . .

Jacqui: To you tend to like animated stuff? Do you like adventure movies?

Zoë: I like adventure stuff, action. I like interesting stuff to happen. But animated and with real people—I like both.

17. What kind of music do you like?

Zoë: Pop.

Jacqui: Do you play music?

Zoë: Well, what do you mean exactly?

Jacqui: Drums!

Zoë: Yes.

Jacqui: Oh that's right, you play drums.

18. What is the best part of being transgender?

Zoë: It makes me very unique, and I like being unique. I don't like to be the same as other people.

Jacqui: Cool. That's a great answer.

19. What do you wish I'd asked you, and what have I left out?

[And I want to just make a note here. Zoë won a solitaire game while she was doing this interview. They're all sitting there with the kings on top.]

[Back to Zoë]: **So, is there anything that you'd like to share that I didn't think of asking you about?**

Zoë: Not really. I can't really think of anything that you didn't ask me.

Jacqui: Yeah, cause you pretty much covered stuff.

Jacqui: Okay, we're just going to do an addendum here, and talk about Jillian.

Zoë: So, when I couldn't go to Colman because they were being ridiculous . . . Anyway, she was going to go to [YMCA Camp] Orkila, but she said she wouldn't.

Jacqui: Like, she was going to boycott Orkila to support you?

Zoë: Yeah, and she wouldn't go.

Carolyn: And she'd really been looking forward to it.

Jacqui: Was this last summer? Oh man, whoa, that's intense. Did she let them know about her decision?

Carolyn: She and her parents wrote a letter.

Jacqui: Yeah, see that's what this is about for me. It's like: *People, wake up! There's so much we've got to do*, even how we label our bathrooms: who can go into this bathroom and who can't. Like, at Ingersoll, which is the Seattle Counseling Center, their bathrooms still have male and female pictures on them. Just saying: *Why? Why don't you just have a picture of a toilet? It doesn't have to be a picture of a male toilet or a female toilet . . .*

Zoë: There's no difference in toilets!

Jacqui: Right!