The Eye of the Beholder

Ever think of what it must be to go through life feeling like a square peg being pounded into a round hole? Thousands of transgender people have chosen to undertake dramatic cosmetic surgery in order to match their visible gender identity on the outside to how they have felt on the inside since the first years of life. Thanks to the internet and a never-ending news cycle, the difficulty of a transgender identity and steps to transition are increasing in the mass media. The sexual revolution of the 1960's up through the early 1980's pushed the boundaries of traditional gender identify. With gay marriage in the U.S. becoming an accepted norm, understanding transgender identity is the new frontier of civil rights. We are in the midst of a true gender revolution. Ms. Jenner and her recent revelations have made this an issue that crosses all generations and has been educational for the world.

There is extreme uncertainty on the incidence of gender identity disorder, which is the official medical diagnosis of a transgender person. As transgender identity becomes more accepted and transgender people are more open with their gender identity, it is surprising that one of the world's leading plastic surgeons who performs face and body feminization in the international gender community is right in our own backyard. He is Mark L. Zukowski, M.D., an Illinois board-certified plastic surgeon.

Dr. Zukowski is a Fellow at the American College of Surgeons and a Diplomate of the American Board of Plastic Surgery. He practices in Wilmette, Illinois and specializes in face and body feminization surgery - the process of turning men into women from the waist up. Dr. Zukowski is regarded as the top plastic surgeon in the world by his peers and patients in performing face and body feminization. A graduate of Northwestern Medical School, he began his residency in 1985 in general surgery and in 1988 in plastic surgery at Northwestern Memorial Hospital. For six years he was a plastic surgeon in the U.S. Navy, paying back a medical school scholarship debt, where he sharpened his plastic surgery skills. "As a Naval plastic surgeon working with thousands of male patients and their families, there is nowhere else in the world you can get that kind of training," states Dr. Zukowski.

Every year, hundreds of people elect to have Dr. Zukowski's radically change their appearance from the waist on up. 65% of his practice is gender-related and ranges to up to 80% in any given year. Most are male-to-female transitions. A smaller segment is female-to-male transitions.

His surgical first assistant, Mark Klingler commented, "People come from all over the world to have themselves feminized and masculinized. Some are CEO's, some are celebrities, but most are the common man. Some are gender variant and live their lives in both their male and female persona's. They want to look their best en femme when at home or out of town, but want to look their best in a boy mode."

In a series of cosmetic facial procedures that can take from four hours up to ten hours to achieve the right results, the human canvas reveals its secrets to the doctor. Each person has different needs. Dr. Zukowski is the only feminization surgeon in the world to use advanced 21st century endoscopic techniques to achieve his results. This avoids the sensory and sinus problems
associated with older "open" techniques. Sculpting of the jaw and cheek is common for the lower face. Cheek implants are common for the midface. A reduction of the patient's brow ridge is critical. The nose may be reshaped and the scalp advanced. The upper lip is shortened and the red of the lips plumped. A tracheal shave - reducing the Adam's apple - is critical. Because of the amount of work done to the face, breast implants and a Brazilian butt lift that liposculpts the body into an hourglass shape and fills fat into the buttocks to give "junk in the trunk", are procedures elected at the second stage. Dr. Zukowski does not do the genital work.

When patients awake from their anesthesia, they will feel like they were run over by a truck. They will not see their results until their bandages are removed a few days later. When the swelling subsides, the results are astounding.

One patient, Briana Fleury of Milwaukee, a former electrician at Miller Brewing, and the first person to transition at that company, describes her life experiences. "In 1967, when I was 12, I told my parents that I thought I was a girl. Well, they sent me to a shrink who said it was 'just a phase'..." A very long phase.

"I was acting my life rather than living it," recalls Briana. I found myself competing against others to be more masculine. I was an indoor paintball champ, and worked on cars and I would shoot guns." For years Briana figured she was just your run-of-the-mill crossdresser. "I came to realize after consulting with Dr. Zukowski my true nature as a woman."

Briana began the process of surgical change with Dr. Zukowski in 2006. "It began with "Benjamin's Standards of Care." The Standards were developed in 1979, and are a series of non-binding patient protocols for those who have gender dysphoria. Briana had to live as a woman for at least a year. Her entire body underwent electrolysis and she was given female hormones. With the estrogen she lost muscular mass and feminine curves began to take hold. And she had to go to work every day dressed as a woman.

"The people at Miller could tell I was transitioning, and they didn’t quite know how to handle it. I think they could not comprehend how it is to question your gender. People who used to be my friends would no longer talk to me, and they would move away from me when I entered the room. Emotionally it was devastating." "The women were the worst to me. HR at work said they had to treat me respectfully. They took out their anger on me because they had to earn respect in the work place and I didn’t. I was given my own bathroom too, which upset them." Eventually an African-American man at work came over and started talking to me and became a friend. He understood the concept of discrimination and being a second-class citizen. After that, the ice started to melt and things got better with everyone." "I spent over $100,000 in total for all of my therapy, hormones, surgeries, and associated treatments, but it was the best investment that I ever made. The most important part is to get the facial feminization done. It's more critical than getting the genitals corrected, because the face is the part everyone sees. Looks are everything unfortunately for a woman in society these days."

"I've never had anyone come back with a case of buyer's remorse," says Dr. Zukowski. "That's why they live as a woman for a year before the procedure. I was given a gift to be able to
surgically sculpt a patient’s face and body and help that patient be as beautiful on the outside as they feel on the inside.”