

# At 12 I grew a beard and had a period

22 April 2016 | [Magazine](#)



**When Alec Butler was born in 1959 it was assumed Alec was female. But after being brought up as a girl, Alec - now an award-winning writer and film-maker - realised they were intersex, someone whose**

## In today's Magazine

**Why is there so much sugar in some savoury foods?**

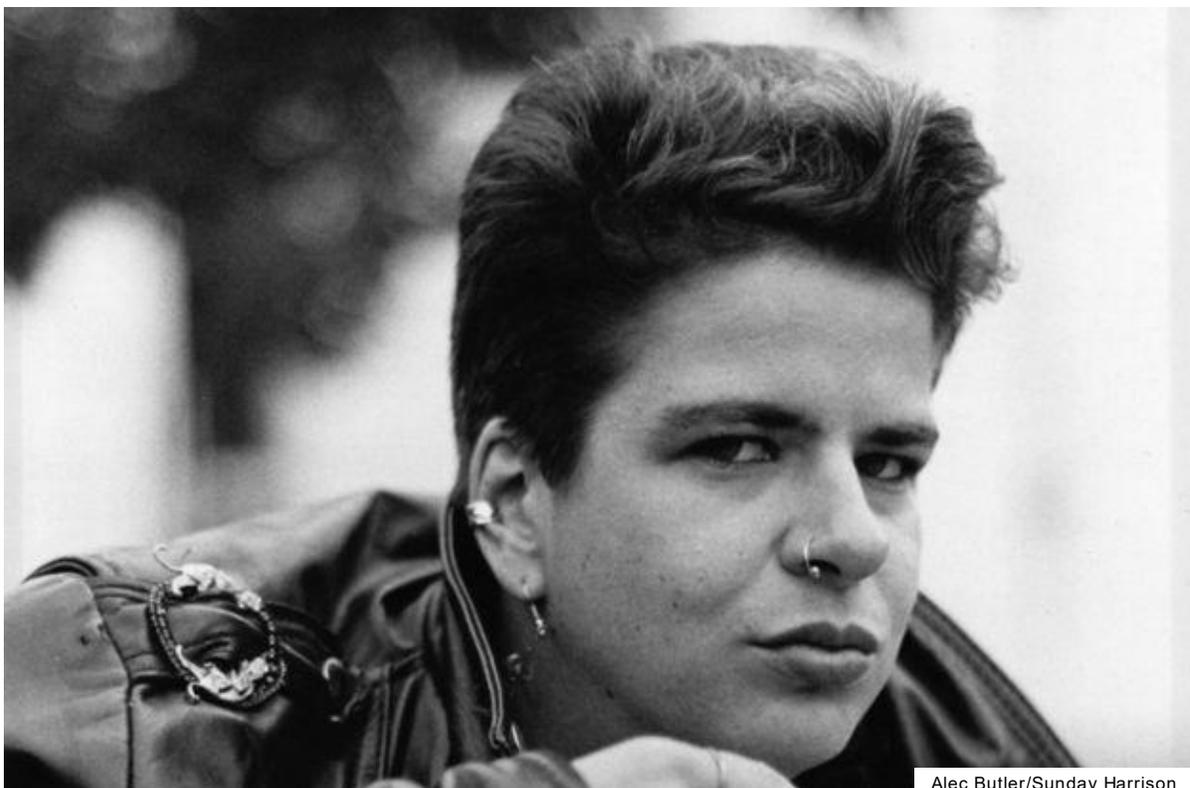
## **anatomical, hormonal or genetic sex is neither completely male nor female.**

I was about 12 when it really hit. I started to grow a beard and I had a period. So it was really confusing for me. My parents were a little freaked out. They took me to some doctors, but no-one knew about being intersex in the small town where I grew up in Canada. One doctor said, "We're going to have to put her in a mental institution until she learns how to dress like a girl and put on makeup." This was at the age of 12, when even most genetic girls aren't being forced to do that. Luckily my parents were outraged and they said, "We're not going to do that. We're just going to love you, and you can choose how you want to be." That was a gift. Lots of intersex kids don't have that.

My whole family was very loving. I had lots of vitality, I was funny, and I could entertain people with my Elvis Presley impersonations. I was always interested in art and writing. As a kid I remember seeing a Van Gogh painting. I was blown away by it. My parents were working class, and the only books at home were encyclopaedias which I read back to back. My family was very accepting of me - it was just school and society that were hard.

## **Explaining the Leicester City story to Americans**

## **Reykjavik skeletons cause controversy**



Alec Butler/Sunday Harrison



As soon as I could get away with wearing trousers all the time, I did. That was really difficult back then, to be a girl and to want to wear trousers. And I felt pressure to take female hormones to make me more feminine, even though I wanted to be more masculine - I wanted to be a boy.

At school I was picked on. I was worried about being called crazy so I tried to fit in, tried not to get in too much trouble. But when you're in a body like mine, it is trouble. People get upset. I had problems because I liked a girl, and she actually liked me too. But it all went terribly wrong because I was intersex and not really a boy I guess. I was called lesbian, lezzie, dyke... and I was screamed at by the other kids, "You're sick! You're sick!" I was passed notes in class, stuff like, "Why don't you just kill yourself?"





At that time we were living on a military base in the east of Canada in Oromocto because my dad was in the army. The school was huge, and because I was bullied constantly, my dad got really worried about what might happen. So he took early retirement, lost a chunk of his pension, and we moved to the bush in Cape Breton, an island off Nova Scotia. But in many ways that was even more oppressive because it was so isolated and people were even more ignorant.

When I graduated from high school in 1978, I found it hard to get a job. I moved to Toronto to live my life as a queer person and to follow my dreams. Back then I was presenting as a butch lesbian. It was a way of getting a community, support and feeling accepted. I didn't know any other intersex people - I didn't even know the word back then.

## Glossary

- **Intersex:** Applies to a person with a combination of sex characteristics - chromosomes, genitals or reproductive organs - neither solely male nor female
- **Non-binary:** Applies to a person who does not identify as "male" or "female"
- **Genderqueer:** Similar to "non-binary"... the term is sometimes shortened to "queer" (an ambiguous word that can also be used to describe a person's sexual orientation, eg lesbian / gay / bisexual)
- **Transgender:** Applies to a person whose gender is different from their "assigned" sex at birth, often shortened to "trans"

Find out more: [Gendered Intelligence](#)

See also: [A guide to transgender terms](#)

Life wasn't easy. I had people threaten me with death on the street. I had things thrown at me. Somebody tried to throw me under a street car. And at a Gay Pride parade, I was surrounded by gay men who threatened to pull down my trousers. It could be really scary.

Butch lesbians get a huge amount of hatred directed at them, even to this day. One of the reasons I pass more as male now is because psychologically, I couldn't deal with the violence and the expressions of hatred.



Alec Butler

The film *Audrey's Beard* recorded Alec abandoning the identity of "butch dyke"

But I got my plays produced, and I made a name for myself in the community.

During the early 1990s, I took care of friends who were dying of Aids. It was a really busy time, a crazy time. I didn't want people to know I had a beard but during that period I just didn't have time to shave. So stubble appeared, and my friends said, "Wow, you have a beard! That's really cool, you should grow it out." So after my friends died, I did grow my

beard in memory of them, and in honour of how they accepted me. But I got in trouble again - it didn't go down well in the lesbian bars. Women would say, "What are you doing at a lesbian bar?" And I was like, "Well, I'm a lesbian too, and some of us have beards."

It was probably not until the mid-1990s that I knew I was intersex. One day someone I'd known for years said, "Do you think you might be intersex?" And I was like, "What's that, intersex!?" So I ended up googling it and researching it very intensively, and I thought, "Yeah, that's what I am." And then I remembered things my mother told me about when she was pregnant with me. She was taking a drug called progestin, and I know from my research that it causes intersex in babies, so I think that's what happened to me.



Alec Butler was talking to Linda Pressly - listen to her report for The Documentary on BBC World Service from 03:00 GMT on Sunday 24 April 2016, or [catch up afterwards on iPlayer](#).

As people become increasingly connected and more mobile, the BBC is exploring how identities are changing. As part of this, [The Salon: Stories of women's identity from the hairdresser's chair](#), is speaking to people around the world.

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In the late 1990s I changed my name to Alec. My partner and I both came out as transgender - from lesbian lovers, we became brothers! It was quite a shock to the community. I didn't really have to do anything except change my name because I was already pretty masculine. And I like my body the way it is - I had no desire to change it. I like having a beard. I like having breasts. I just like it. It works for me most of the time. It's hard to start a relationship though, because it is different. Sometimes it's tough for lovers to get their heads around, but I appreciate people

who reach out and try to break down those walls.

It's really problematic for people to understand the concept of being intersex. And intersex people have had a hard time of it. If they've been surgically altered, they're told to hide it, and they're ashamed. Many people align with one gender or the other. Perhaps it's easier to live like that, to choose to be a man or a woman, and stick with it. But now there are alliances being built between non-binary queers like me, and other intersex people. And it's more hopeful for those born intersex - surgery isn't as important any more, and parents have realised it's their own anxiety they're trying to fix when they choose one or other gender for their children. The kids are usually fine with it. I was fine with being taken for a boy or a girl - it was fun sometimes to fool people.

In terms of pronouns, I use "they" and "he". I sometimes get called "she". I don't really mind that, but it does depend where it's coming from. If it's said in a rude manner, I don't like that. But I don't really mind - it's just a pronoun!

## More from the Magazine

In the English language, the word "he" is used to refer to males and "she" to refer to females. But some people identify as neither gender, or both - which is why an increasing number of US universities are making it easier for people to choose to be referred to by other pronouns, writes Avinash Chak.

### **Beyond 'he' and 'she': The rise of non-binary pronouns**

Now I'm studying Aboriginal studies at the University of Toronto. In Canada's native communities before colonisation, transgender people, masculine women and feminine men were seen as doubly blessed because they possessed the spirit of both male and female. They were two-spirit people. It's a controversial term, but they were hugely important - teachers, marriage counsellors, and they were given special roles in ceremonies.

I found out about my native heritage in a very painful way. When my mother was dying, I asked her why she left school at 12. She told me she couldn't take it any more, being called a dirty little Indian. I asked

her if that was true. She didn't really answer because it was just something you couldn't talk about - you're taught to be ashamed of your native heritage. But the way she looked at me, I definitely got the message that "Yes, we have native ancestors." For me, identifying as two-spirit means I can feel good about being a man and a woman in one body. And my whole purpose in going back to school is to reclaim that two-spirit identity - it complements my non-binary, intersex identity. It puts the puzzle together for me as a person in this world: I'm not weird, I'm part of humanity. Other people like me exist and have always existed, despite efforts to wipe us out.



Alec Butler/Tobaron Waxman

Now I'm taking testosterone - not because I need to pass as more male, but because of health reasons. For some reason I still get periods, and my doctor's saying, "You should be in menopause by now." But I'm not. And my periods are so physically demanding. I get a lot of pain and it interrupts my creative life. So I'm on testosterone to deal with that.

I think it's amazing that a growing number of young Canadians are identifying as non-binary. I wish it had happened 40 years ago when I was a kid because I would've had a much less traumatic life. This new movement has given me a lot of confidence. I actually look forward to going out most days whereas I didn't really go out much before. It was just too hard and too uncomfortable. I would get confronted by people -

they'd come up and pinch my boob and say, "Oh, they're real," and I'm like "Yeah, they're real - you didn't have to do that." So maybe an acceptance of non-binary people will help - you can't assume you can touch somebody or say just anything. You can't even assume someone's male or female, and that's good.

The message I want to put out to my community - intersex, non-binary and native - is, be proud to be mixed gender and mixed race. That's what I've learned to be - proud.

## **Pieces of me**

Five non-binary people, including Alec, pick the objects that reflect who they are.

Five non-binary people show their treasured possessions

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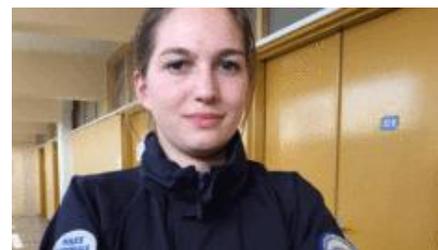
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