

Wife, daughter accept man's sex change; she feels OK, too

Cross-dressing led to awareness, study of gender identity disorder

By SACHIE NAKADA
Kyodo

OSAKA — He had only been married a year when the man who now goes by the name Tomomi Sakura dropped a bombshell on his wife.

"You're really getting an old ladylike face," the wife had told him one evening as they relaxed after dinner. Sakura then told her, "Actually, I'm thinking about becoming an old lady officially."

"You're kidding!" was the wife's immediate reaction, Sakura said, adding that shocking her led to feelings of regret.

But his wife apparently accepted him for who he is, telling him the following day, "It's all right if I can find myself in love with you as a person, not necessarily as a man."

She made one request: "We want a child, don't we?" The couple now have a daughter who is 12.

Sakura, a writer who now goes by the name Tomomi for public engagements and lives in Osaka Prefecture, was born in 1964. That year a gynecologist performed sex change operations on three men at a Tokyo clinic — and was arrested the following year and convicted for performing the surgeries without confirming if they were needed for therapeutic reasons.

The case attached a stigma to gender identity disorder and made it taboo for medical professionals for many years to provide adequate care or even information about GID.

Growing up in that environment and without much access to information about the disorder, Sakura, who last December underwent surgery to become a woman, felt uncomfortable as a male, couldn't seem to blend in on a boys' baseball team and thought everything would be all right if a sex change was performed.

After graduating from a university, Sakura joined a company running cram schools. She recently recalled feeling stressed in the office working as a man, about buying pink sweaters and miniskirts and being haunted by fear and guilt for feeling happy about donning cute

outfits and cosmetics while still a man in his 30s.

The first venture outdoors dressed as a woman during which no one noticed anything out of the ordinary brought tears of relief, she recalled.

Sakura came to know about GID in 1996 when it was mentioned in a news report. That was "the moment everything came to make sense and my anxieties were answered," Sakura said.

It was in July that year that Saitama Medical University's ethics panel said GID is a condition that warrants help from medical professionals.

That was also about the time Sakura met the woman he would marry. She was different, unlike other women who often expect a man to be strong and protective, Sakura said.

"I thought I would feel relaxed around her if I could share a life with this person," Sakura said. "Back then, I still had that glimmer of hope that I might be able to live as a man if I married her."

But one year after their marriage, feeling frustrated about hiding the truth, Sakura chose to tell his wife about his decision, even though he feared she might leave.

Even after deciding to begin living as a woman, Sakura never told his father, who lived nearby. He died in 2004 and Sakura played the role of host at his memorial service, wearing a man's formal suit.

The suit "didn't really fit me," Sakura said, adding that despite the desire to let him in on the truth, "some things should be left unsaid to do good to a parent."

Sakura was admitted to Osaka University's graduate school in 2003 to gain deeper knowledge about gender studies and completed a master's program.

The Japanese Society for Psychiatry and Neurology drew up guidelines for GID treatment in 1997 that provided the impetus for a whole range of departments, from gynecology to plastic surgery to counseling, hormone treatment and other therapy, according to Mikiya Nakatsuka, director at the Japan Society of Gender Identity Disorder.

Saitama Medical University conducted the first gender reassignment surgery in line with the society's guidelines in 1998.

In December 2010, Sakura underwent surgery to have his male sexual organs removed.

Under current law, Sakura can't record the gender change in the family registry because of a provision that bars such a change by someone married with an underage child.

The provision, according to Nakatsuka, is intended to prevent children

with GID parents from becoming confused. But he said some overseas studies suggest there would be no adverse impact on children.

Many GID specialists in the medical profession believe this provision should be eliminated, he said.

Occasionally, Sakura is invited to speak about her experiences at schools or community meetings. On such occasions, she brings along the couple's daughter, who is in elementary school, hoping it will help the girl get to know Sakura better.

Sakura said her daughter never asked why her father became a woman, believing she has already come to terms with it.

On one Father's Day after the daughter started going to elementary school, she gave her father a pink pouch, telling him, "I thought it would be good for putting cosmetics in."

Sakura said that although their family is not a conventional one, she feels comfortable by being accepted.

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