

Man raised as a girl challenges theories on sexual identities

By Robert Stacy McCain
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

David Reimer is a Canadian factory worker in his 30s, with a wife and three children. He enjoys fishing, backyard barbecues and working on his car.

But for 15 years of his life, David was Brenda — raised as a girl even though he had been born a perfectly healthy boy with a twin brother.

The amazing story of how David Reimer went from boy to girl before eventually demanding that he would be a man has created an upheaval in theories of sexual identity.

"It's challenged a lot of the notions that I just accepted growing up in the 1970s," says John Colapinto, a journalist for Rolling Stone who tells Mr. Reimer's story in a new book, "As Nature Made Him: The Boy Who Was Raised As a Girl."

After a botched circumcision on their infant son in 1966, Mr. Reimer's parents consulted John Money, a famous psychologist and pioneering sex researcher at Johns Hopkins University.

Mr. Money, who has been credited with coining the term "gender identity," had persuaded Johns Hopkins to become the first hospital in America to perform transsexual surgery in 1965. He claimed parental influences and society formed sexual identity, so that the sense of being male or female was created "in the course of the various experiences of growing up."

Mr. Money convinced the Reimers their son, by then nearly 2 years old, should undergo sex-change surgery and be raised as a girl. They agreed, and the radical surgery was performed at Johns Hopkins in 1967. Years of therapy followed.

Influential scientists cited the success of the case Mr. Money referred to as "John/Joan" as proof of his theory that "the sexual behavior and orientation as male or



David Reimer is shown at age 12 (left), when he was known as Brenda, at 18, two years after he had begun reverting to being a man.



Photos courtesy of the Reimer family

Despite hormone treatments beginning at age 10, Brenda insisted she was a boy.

female does not have an innate, instinctive basis." In 1973, Time magazine said the "dramatic case provides strong support for a major contention of women's liberationists: that conventional patterns of masculine and feminine behavior can be altered."

During the decades while the "proof" of Mr. Money's theory was influencing both politics and science, however, there was one problem: His theory wasn't working with young "Brenda" Reimer.

Despite being outfitted in frilly dresses, despite years of counseling and therapy, despite hormone treatments beginning at age 10, Brenda insisted she was a boy.

His parents finally told him the

truth. At age 17, Brenda began medical treatment to become a man. Although the surgical damage inflicted on him at age 2 was in some ways irreversible, in 1990 David Reimer married a woman with three children from previous marriages and takes pride in being a loving husband and father.

Mr. Reimer's story contradicts much of what Americans have believed for decades about sexual identity, says Mr. Colapinto.

"Feminism and other consciousness-raising movements of the '70s taught me and everybody else that we are primarily the products of our upbringing," Mr. Colapinto says. "And, furthermore, that as men, our upbringings probably distorted us into chauvinistic, overaggressive, single-minded Neanderthals."

Having once favored the '70s ideal of being an "ungendered, sensitive, Alan Alda type," Mr. Colapinto says, he rejected traditional male roles as "regressive and narrow-minded."

But the author says that meeting Mr. Reimer — who struggled for years to express his natural mas-



David Reimer married Jane Anne Fontane in 1990, and is a father to her children from an earlier marriage.

Group seeks to end sex-change surgery on infants

WASHINGTON TIMES

The drastic sex-change surgery performed on David Reimer as an infant was "medically unnecessary," say advocates for those born with genital abnormalities.

"Sex assignment doesn't depend on surgery," says Cheryl Chase, executive director of the Intersex Society of North America. Her organization seeks protection for those children — "intersex" is preferred to "hermaphrodite" — whose genitals show both male and female characteristics.

culinity despite efforts by adults to convince him to be a girl — has changed his opinion.

Mr. Colapinto says he recognized that "the very pride that David takes in his manhood is something he need not feel ashamed of and . . . that men, generally, can do the same if they, like David Reimer, live up to their own responsibil-

ity as fathers and husbands." Where conservatives may be tempted to cite Mr. Reimer's story to naysay feminism, advocates of homosexual rights see evidence of the fixed nature of sexual orientation.

"It does very much support the contention that sexual orientation is not something that can be changed or altered," says David Smith, communication director of the Human Rights Campaign, "and further supports that sexual orientation is an unchangeable aspect of who a person is."

At another level, Mr. Colapinto says, Mr. Reimer's story teaches a lesson about how harmful scientific arrogance can be.

"John Money was going to play God," the author says. His book explains how Mr. Money's use of Mr. Reimer as a guinea pig for his research at Johns Hopkins involved a bizarre form of therapy called

sex researcher who helped expose the failure of Johns Hopkins University psychologist John Money's treatment in the Reimer case.

In the event of infants born with ambiguous genitalia, doctors should "assign a gender best as you can predict, on the basis of the diagnosis, but do no surgery," Mr. Diamond says. "And the individual can make up his or her own mind as they grow up" whether they are male or female and seek further treatment if they desire.

— Robert Stacy McCain

sexual rehearsal play." "John Money was the most provocative and outspoken pioneer in the '70s sexual revolution, and . . . published extraordinary views about what is appropriate in the sexual life of children," Mr. Colapinto says.

After cooperating in the writing of a book and telling his story on several national television broadcasts, David Reimer now turns down most requests for media interviews, Mr. Colapinto says.

"It's very difficult for him to speak about these things," says the author. "He wasn't sure how the world was taking what he was telling them."

But Mr. Colapinto says Mr. Reimer's battle against overwhelming odds to recapture his manhood has been greeted with "a tremendous outpouring of support . . . commending him for his courage."