

He was born a girl by the name of Melissa, but it was a name that never fit. And all his life, more than anything, Mel, as he now calls himself, has wanted to fit

RETURN to gender

By ANNE BOKMA

Photography by DANIEL EHRENWORTH

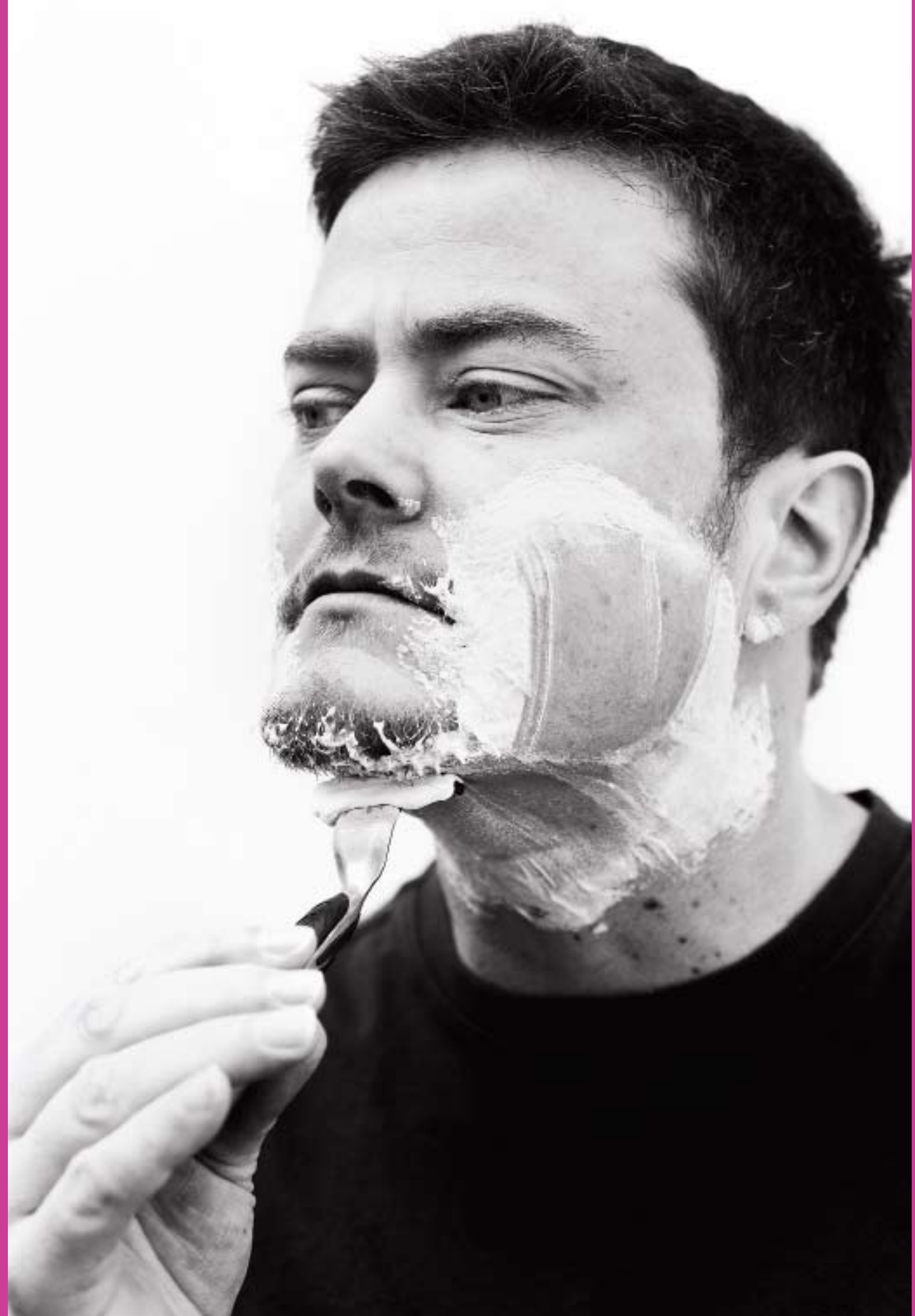
MEL RUTHERFORD IS A MARRIED FATHER of five-year-old twin boys and stepfather to a 17-year-old girl. One of Canada's leading experts in autism, the 41-year-old is an associate professor of psychology and director of the Human Development Centre at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ont. He is a graduate of Yale, the winner of a Fulbright Fellowship and holds a Canada Research Chair.

Rutherford is also transgendered — a “trans man” or FTM (female to male) who, over the past two years, has made a successful transition to living life fully as a man. His body has been transformed by weekly testosterone injections — he has a thicker neck, narrower hips, a receding hairline, a beard and, yes, a higher sex drive. His voice has dropped several octaves. He's said goodbye to the monthly mess of tampons and pads and hello to the daily practice of shaving, a ritual he relishes.

Most significantly, he and everyone in his world has made the pronoun switch from “she” to “he.”

Beyond the physical transformation, there's been an even more profound shift. No longer is there sexual ambiguity about Rutherford's gender, no confusion about whether he's a masculine-looking female or a feminine-looking male. The question of androgyny has been replaced by the certainty of

HAIR AND MAKEUP: SABRINA RINALDI FOR TRESEMME HAIR CARE/JUDYING.COM



THEN CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: At Yale where 21-year-old Rutherford, while openly gay, did not think of himself as transgendered. At 25, he travelled to Thailand. Rutherford with his mother in San Francisco at age 23.



his sex. Gone is the former wariness he used to experience when meeting people for the first time. “I was often misperceived, and people had a hard time categorizing me and figuring out what box I fit into. That made for a lot of very awkward interactions,” says Rutherford. “Being more comfortable with others and feeling their acceptance is huge for me. The result has been a different relationship with the world.” For the first time in his adult life he can pass as a man with no hint of the woman he once was.

What’s remarkable about Rutherford’s transition is how seamless it’s been, the only ripple an occasional pronoun slip-up from a friend or colleague. The smoothness of his passage from female to male is significant for what it says about our greater acceptance of trans culture. Part of the credit for this is due to the growing incidence of the transgendered in popular culture — think of movies such as *Boys Don’t Cry* and *Transamerica*, and famous folks such as Cher’s daughter, Chastity Bono (now known as “Chaz”), who has announced she is transitioning to live as a man.

Regular folks are coming out of the transgender closet in droves — much as their gay counterparts did 20 years ago, says Gail Knudson, medical director of the Transgender Health Program at Vancouver Coastal Health and past president of the Canadian Professional Association for Transgender Health. “One person like Rutherford can make a huge change and huge shift in people’s thinking — the less we see this as something sensational and the more we see people who have transitioned as just living regular lives, the greater the acceptance.” It’s this acceptance that’s giving a new generation the confidence to transition earlier in life, rather than living for years wishing they were someone else. “In the past five years, we have seen a fivefold increase in youth presenting as transgendered across Canada,” notes Knudson.

It’s impossible to say how many transgendered people live in Canada, since no adequate data have been collected. Estimates vary widely, from one in 1,000 to one in 30,000. It’s also not known how many undergo the process of transitioning.

Trans•gen•dered (often abbreviated to **trans**) refers to a person with a gender identity different from his or her birth sex or who expresses his or her gender in ways that contravene societal expectations. This umbrella term may include cross-dressers, drag kings/queens, transsexuals and people who are androgynous.

Indeed, “transitioning” can mean different things to different people — for some, it’s dressing in their chosen gender some or all of the time, or taking male or female hormones, or undergoing gender reassignment surgery. For women who transition to men, surgery can include hysterectomy, mastectomy, chest contouring, metoidioplasty (releasing the clitoris from its hood to appear as a small penis) and phalloplasty (the construction of a penis). For men who transition to women, surgery can involve reducing the Adam’s apple, breast augmentation, voice surgery, penectomy (removal of the penis), orchiectomy (removal of the testicles) and vaginoplasty (creating a vagina). Facial hair removal (through electrolysis or laser treatments) is also considered key. In order to be approved for genital surgery, candidates are typically expected to pass what’s called a “real life test” and first live in their chosen gender full-time for one year. They must also be diagnosed with gender identity disorder by a specially trained mental health professional.

As with many transgendered people, Rutherford takes issue with the fact that his desire to live in the oppos-



NOW Mel and his wife, Melanie Parish, with their five-year-old twin boys, Xander and Emerson (on Rutherford’s shoulders).

ite gender of his birth is considered a mental illness. “It would be nice if it was considered an endocrinological disorder, not a psychiatric disorder,” he says. “It’s the hormones that need to be corrected, not the psyche.”

Rutherford says he never felt trapped in the wrong body. “I never hated or rejected my body. I just wanted to change it.” Early in life, he perceived himself in gender-neutral terms. In kindergarten, when the boys chased the girls and tried to kiss them, Rutherford wasn’t in either camp. “None of the boys tried to chase me or kiss me. I played the protector and tried to ward off the boys and protect the girls,” he recalls. At eight years old, he met a bunch of kids while strawberry picking and remembers being delighted when they assumed he was a boy. All through his youth he was never once maligned for his androgyny. He sailed through school as a straight-A student, a popular kid and student body president. In his senior year, he had his first girlfriend and told his parents he was gay. (Being transgendered is not a sexual orientation — it’s a question of identity and does not dictate attraction.)

Although his parents accepted his sexuality, there was on-going conflict with his father about his masculine appearance. Rutherford grew up in Oregon, where his father was head of that state’s Republican party. Whenever the family went out in public, his father would insist on a more feminine style. “My father tried hard to teach me how to be a girl, that there were certain rules for women — how they should dress, how they shouldn’t carry things in their pockets. He’d want me to shave my legs,” says Rutherford. “He was disapproving and disappointed. It bothered me and distanced our relationship.”

Life became more challenging once he got to Yale University, where being out in the ’80s (“pre-Ellen,” as Rutherford calls that era) was still relatively rare. His residence floor of all-female students actively ostracized him. “I remember trying to talk to one of them about the idea of being a homophobe and she said, ‘I’m not a homophobe, I’m a homo hater.’ It was a different world.” Although he was openly gay then, he didn’t think of himself as transgendered until about 10 years ago when it suddenly dawned on him that some people perceived him as a girl. “It was the first time it clicked for me that I’d been going around all my life using a girl’s name and that people were perceiving me as a girl. I just didn’t think of myself as female. When that

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PHOTOS THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: SAN ZALUTSKY, EVA KOLODNER, COURTESY OF MEL RUTHERFORD, OPPOSITE PAGE, DANIEL EHRENWORTH



happened, it was as if I suddenly became aware that my fly was open.”

Rutherford joined a transgender support group and identified as transgendered. Then he met his future wife, Melanie Parish, an executive coach and divorced mother of one who is straight but was drawn to him. “I was attracted to men but fell in love with Mel,” she says. The couple moved to Canada when Rutherford got a posting at McMaster University and were married in 2003. Two years later, they had twin boys, Xander and Emerson, who were conceived by harvesting Rutherford’s eggs, fertilizing them using donor sperm through in vitro fertilization and implanting them in Parish’s uterus. (The two fought and won a 2006 Ontario legal challenge to both be recognized on their children’s birth certificates as biological parents — previously a child born to a same-sex couple in that province had to be adopted by the non-gestational parent.)

Rutherford had known for years that he wanted to transition, but it wasn’t until he approached his 40th birthday that he knew the timing was right. His family was complete and he had won tenure at McMaster, which meant that, unlike a large percentage of people who transition, his job would not be in jeopardy. A year’s sabbatical in 2008 provided the perfect opportunity to make a fresh start as a new man. He told his students and professional colleagues he would be using masculine pronouns upon his return, and the groundwork was laid. “It was kind of a now or never thing — it made a lot of sense doing this at 40,” he says. “I was thinking about what the rest of my life was going to be like, and there was no

reason to wait.” Midlife is commonly a time for reflection on the direction of one’s life and that’s why so many transsexuals decide to transition in their forties or fifties or even later, says Knudson. “Sometimes it’s because of a milestone birthday, but we also see people who say they didn’t want to transition until after their kids were grown, or after they’ve divorced or their parent or partner dies and they finally feel free to do this.”

A number of factors combined to aid in the success of Rutherford’s transition, says Knudson. Those who fare the best tend not to have a history of significant mental health problems, have family support and work in an environment with policies against discrimination based on gender identity.

It also helps that Rutherford transitioned from female to male, which tends to be easier than male to female transitions. “Females to males can grow facial hair, their bodies masculinize so they pass very well and don’t suffer as much overt discrimination,” says Knudson. “But if you are a six-foot-four guy who is hairy with big hands and feet and you try to transition, it’s a different story.” Rutherford concurs: “Males to females have a harder time and meet more prejudice and even violence. I think there’s more fear of them in society.”

To get himself physically ready, Rutherford went to Weight Watchers and lost 50 pounds over the course of a year. At the same time, he started the testosterone injections. Within three months, people who had never met him before assumed he was a man. His mood evened out too. “It was more stable and I had the feeling that everything was going to be okay. I think that estrogen can create an emotional roller coaster and suppressing those hormones creates more of a feeling of contentment.”

Also, his sex drive skyrocketed. “Before I transitioned, one of my big fears was that this would compel me to do things that were socially unacceptable — flirt or make stupid double entendres or act like a jerk. Or that I’d be led astray or feel more attracted to more people. But that hasn’t hap-

pened.” What it has done is rejuvenate his sex life with his wife, he says.

Parish attests to this: “Every marriage in midlife should get a shot of testosterone,” she laughs, adding that she finds Rutherford more attractive than ever. “He looks more like a guy and since I’m straight that works for me.”

Parish admits she did worry about potential negative effects the testosterone might have on her husband. “It was a fear of the unknown — would he become a different person?” Those fears were unfounded, although there has been one change that she attributes to the male hormones: “I swear he’s more aggressive in traffic — I fear for my life sometimes.” The best part, she says, is seeing her husband happier than he’s ever been. “Mel has been able to change his outward appearance so that the rest of the world can finally see him the way he has always seen himself. And he did it all in such a classy way.”

Even his kids have taken things in stride. Because he appears more obviously masculine, his stepdaughter, Sela, no longer feels compelled to explain her parents’ relationship to her new friends. And the twins, who have always called him “Teddy,” switched to “Dad” all on their own. “Right around the time when I started reliably being perceived as male they started calling me Dad without any instructing or coaching,” says Rutherford. Except for the weight loss and the addition of a beard, apparently nothing has changed from their perspective.

Even his elderly father has come round. When Rutherford told his 71-year-old dad that he was taking testosterone and transitioning to live as a man, his father’s immediate reaction was relief — that and amusement because he was taking testosterone too. Now that Rutherford looks more obviously like a man, his father is more comfortable with his gender identity. “I don’t think he thought I was pulling off the girl thing very well,” says Rutherford. “He’s proud to have me as his son.” **M**