

Lost in the celebration

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by Sophia Lee June 10,
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It was a day Denise Shick had been dreaming about for years. She stood at the church foyer in an ivory hand-stitched gown, her mind racing and her heart thumping. When the wedding march began, her father crooked his left arm toward her, and as they took their first step, he leaned in and whispered, “I wish it were me in that gown.”

Shick almost tripped. While father and daughter walked down the aisle, she was internally screaming with fury and hurt: Why? Why did she have to deal with the pain and confusion of her father’s transgender identity on her special day? Once again she remembered the day her father took the then-9-year-old Shick to a grassy hill outside the house and said, “Denise, I want to be a woman.” She remembered all those times when her father rustled through her underwear drawer and sneaked into motels to cross-dress. Now as her father’s words echoed in her mind throughout the ceremony, Shick wondered if she would ever break free from this broken, twisted relationship with her father.

Shick’s turmoil on her wedding day was just one of many ways her father’s transgender identity affected his family. Too often, the media and society frame the transgender issue in terms of individuals’ choices and desires (see [“Suffer the children,”](#) April 15). Transgenderism has become a civil rights movement, a human rights campaign, a cultural revolution—but the roar of all these cultural and political upheavals has drowned the voice of family members who also experience a life-changing transition.

That day when her father told her he was a woman trapped in a man’s body, Shick felt she had lost a father. As a child Shick did not understand and could not give her father the empathy and affirmation he craved. Her father’s internal war with his biological identity wasn’t just his—it roiled over and smothered the whole family—long before he ultimately left them so he could transition into “Becky.”

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Shick watched her mother morph from a confident woman who wore lipstick and puffed her hair to a genderless shadow who lost all desire to express her femininity. Shick, too, became uncomfortable with her own blossoming womanhood. All the life events that should have brought her joy—her first period, her prom night, the wedding, her first child—instead plunged her into distress as she saw her father’s expression of envy and displeasure. Instead of celebrating her womanhood, she wondered: “Is this the experience he covets? Does he hate me for being a woman?” As a budding teenager she wore shapeless clothes to obliterate all her feminine curves and smuggled makeup to school to apply it there, far away from her father’s stares.



Denise Shick (Matt Rose)

For years, Shick kept the family dysfunction secret: What's the point? Who could ever understand all the day-to-day chaos of her anxiety and stress and tension? Who could help? By age 13 she was drinking heavily and avoiding home, and by 15 the temptation of suicide stalked her. At times she questioned her own gender and sexuality—if God had made a mistake with her father's biology, surely He could have made a mistake with her too?

One man's struggle brought multi-tentacled angst to the entire family. Yet not many professional resources are available for families of transgender-identifying or gender-nonconforming individuals. Most of what's available advocates unequivocal support for the loved one's self-affirmed gender: Accept your loved one's chosen identity, many groups warn, or tragedies such as suicide will happen. Few alternative resources exist for families who grieve the whole process of losing a parent, spouse, child, or sibling. Many family members who hold on to Biblical truths about sex and gender feel extreme pressure from relatives and friends to "just accept" their loved one's new gender expression.

After her father died of cancer, Shick searched two years for an organization that provides Bible-based help and support to families of transgenders. She couldn't find any. But the burden for such a ministry continued to weigh upon her until Shick got on her knees and begged God to either take the burden away or open up the doors.

In 2004 Shick founded Help 4 Families, a Christian ministry for family members of individuals struggling with gender identity issues. Help 4 Families currently provides various support and resources such as one-on-one conversations, support groups, workshops, and conferences. Much of Shick's work involves listening to spouses and parents who feel utterly alone and helpless. She receives about 60 calls a month, but that number is now growing with calls from distressed spouses and parents of increasingly younger kids who identify as transgender. These calls spike during holidays, school breaks, and whenever another celebrity "comes out" as transgender.

HOWARD AND KARIN CHAVIS are one such couple who called Shick, desperate for help and comfort. Their only

son, now 31, had decided to undergo gender reassignment surgery in Thailand, and he wanted his mother to accompany him. Karin Chavis agonized over the decision—as a mother, she longed to be with her son during a major surgical operation in a foreign country. But as a Christian who believes in God’s gender design, she told her son no. The Chavises didn’t hear from their son for months after that phone call.

Ever since their son came out as gay and then transgender, the Chavises tried to maintain good relations with him. They visited him wherever his latest home was—San Francisco, Colorado Springs, Palm Springs—and met his then-lovers. Each time their son announced yet another major transition—hormone therapy, name change, plastic surgery, and breast implants—his parents reeled from shock and loss all over again. “It means no weddings, no baby showers. ... You’re just given this big long line of noes,” Howard Chavis said. They worried about their son’s safety, his health, his relationship choices, the permanent self-mutilation, and most of all, his deliberate rebellion against God.



Howard and Karin Chavis (Greg Schneider/Genesis)

Karin Chavis likened her grief to a train wreck: “You have all these different emotions that are attached to these railcars that are now suddenly derailed from the train crash. That’s the devastation. I didn’t want to live anymore. I just wanted to die.” She blamed herself, at times turned her finger to her husband, then simply let herself drown in guilt, anxiety, and despair.

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When they were first dealing with this issue, church friends and relatives heaped advice on them—“You should pray more.” “You should celebrate it!” “You know, being transgender is a sin!” “Just love your son”—but it wasn’t until they found a support system with other Christian family members going through the same issue that they felt heard and understood. Today the Chavises receive calls from parents desperate for a listening ear and prayers. “Now we’re becoming a resource for other parents,” Howard Chavis said. And perhaps one day, these parents too will become a resource for more family members.

Karin Chavis remembers the countless times she cried out, “Why, God? Why my son?” and begged God to fix him. She said she didn’t understand God’s purpose and didn’t want it at the time; but after she finally stopped fighting against Him and asked God to help her die to herself, she says, she began to feel at peace: “I pray for God to breathe for me.”

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