

Life with a partner who cross dresses

Some wives and girlfriends join in at the Gala

BY DIANE URBANI DE LA PAZ, Peninsula Daily News
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PORT ANGELES - Lorraine Livesey has been in a relationship with a cross-dressing man for 18 years.

Livesey, 48, an ebullient house painter from Maple Ridge, British Columbia, helps coordinate the "S.O." – significant other – program at the Esprit Gala, the transgender convention at the Red Lion Hotel in Port Angeles that will wrap up this weekend.

Among the 160 Esprit attendees are 26 wives and girlfriends, Livesey said.

They came for classes on sexuality and other relationship dynamics; wine-and-cheese socials; "chick-flick frenzy" movie nights - and community.

"For my generation, it was, 'Should we tell the secret?'" remembered Livesey, who added that these days, she and her partner Stephanie Mitchell are relatively open about Mitchell's cross-dressing.

Livesey learned early on that her man liked to dress as a woman.

She's been coming to the Esprit conference since 2002, while Mitchell is one of the organizers and takes photos for the convention yearbook.

Back home in British Columbia, Livesey and Mitchell go out together – both dressed as women – to shop or attend social functions put on by the Cornbury Society, a club for transgender people and their loved ones.



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Stephanie Mitchell, seated, and partner Lorraine Livesey, both of Maple Ridge, British Columbia, sit in a room of the Red Lion Hotel in Port Angeles.

While this is a monogamous relationship both believe will be lifelong, Livesey has no interest in a wedding.

She's divorced, a grandmother, and content.

Mitchell, in contrast, would like to be married.

"She's quite conservative," Livesey said of

her partner.

The question S.O.s often hear is: Why stay with a man who wants to move back and forth across the gender line?

Livesey has no trouble answering.

"My partner is caring and loving, a gentle soul," she said.

Mitchell "is respectful of who I am as a woman. What's not to like about that?"

"And we share clothes.

"We're a good couple."

Married and cross-dressing

Jacqueline Allan, 59, is a transgender man who'll celebrate his 33rd wedding anniversary this year.

"I adore my wife. She has been very supportive," Allan said.

The couple have two grown sons who know their father is a cross-dresser.

Allan is aware, however, that others at the Esprit conference cannot be open with those they love.

"Many people lose their families totally," he said.

"It's rare that the wife actually stays with a transgender partner."

Dana McDonald, who was among the founding attendees of the first Esprit conference in Port Angeles; in 1990, came out as a cross-dresser in 1962, not long after he married his wife.

"I don't understand" everything about being

a transgender person, McDonald said.

So, in the S.O. discussions during Esprit, attendees talk about letting go of the expectation that their spouses ought to comprehend it all.

Instead, "we should all try to accept, rather than understand."

McDonald's wife and grown daughter are aware of his cross-dressing.

His spouse's main concern, he said, is that neighbors and friends may find out about it.

So he declined to be photographed for the newspaper.

Yet "things are really good between us," McDonald said, while acknowledging that there have been tough times over the years, with many arguments and tears shed.

Relationships are, of course, as varied as the outfits Esprit-goers wear.

One S.O., who didn't want to give her real name since she lives on the North Olympic Peninsula, said she never considered her 30ish partner's cross-dressing to be a challenge that needed to be overcome.

"It's like having a best girlfriend . . . and a hot boyfriend," she said.

At this year's conference, Livesey met an older woman who recently learned that her husband of many years cross-dresses.

"She's had so much fun with it," Livesey said, grinning. "She's just bloomed."

While many transgender men undergo surgery and hormone treatments, others choose only to dress as women, Livesey said.

That's the case with Mitchell, who's been cultivating a feminine wardrobe since the days when such men were called transvestites.

Today the preferred term in the transgender community is cross-dresser.

Mitchell has had no surgeries.

"We can't even pierce her ears," Livesey said, smiling again.

Once in a while, Livesey slips up: "I forget my pronouns," she admitted.

"And if I use her masculine name, she doesn't answer."

She and Mitchell do face hostility now and again. People stare and make unkind comments.

Like all couples, their lives are a mix of joy; and struggle -- "quite a journey," said Allan.

"We like our partners because of their soul," Livesey said.

"It's not about sex and gender, male and female.

"It's about love and acceptance of who they are in their soul."

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