

Bella Segal, Rainbow Jews 19.06.2013 Transcript

S Hello, Today's Wednesday 19th June 2013. This is the Rainbow Jews project and we are here at the Montague Centre in London my name is Surat Knan, I'm the project manager and I will be interviewing Bella today. Hi Bella.

B Hi.

S Thank you for coming, Bella would you like to introduce yourself briefly, in terms of full name, background, occupation and that kind of thing.

B Thank you, good morning. My name is Isabella Segal, Bella for short. I am fifty seven years old, I live near Bushey near North West London. I'm a chartered accountant by profession and a partner in a top one hundred field of accountants in London. I'm been married for thirty one plus years, I have two lovely children, a son who is nearly twenty eight, a daughter who's twenty five and a partner who is the nicest person I could think of to live with.

S Thank you.

B Thank you good morning my name is Isabella Segal, Bella for short. I am fifty seven years old, I live in Bushey near North West London. I am a chartered account by profession I am a partner in a large firm of accountants in London. I have been married for thirty one plus years, and I have two children, my son is nearly twenty eight, my daughter twenty five and my partner is the nicest person I could think of to share my life with.

S So Bella, could you tell us a little more about your background on your family background, early child memories and we can start from there.

B Sure, Early childhood memories, I had a very enjoyable loving family upbringing. My mum, my dad and my younger sister. My mum was an archetype like all matriarchs in the Jewish family. Love her bits but she does rule the family with a rod of iron. Growing up was somewhat like being in a war zone on occasions as mum would make her views known. My younger sister, we had an enjoyable childhood. It wasn't a wealthy background, my late dad was a London black cab driver, so whilst we didn't have luxuries in life we didn't go without and it was a very fortunate and enjoyable upbringing. Is there any particular memory in your teenage years, a very strong memory? Yeah, I think my Jewish heritage and up to the age of eight we lived in North West London, I went to a Jewish school, a Jewish Primary school. I think that was the formative years of my Jewish identity and it's stuck with me. Moving on from that, aged thirteen there are certain ritual's that one goes through, which certainly made their mark on me. And whilst I'm not overly observant on keeping all the on fauve I do have a very strong Jewish Identity.

S So would you say you had a religious upbringing or in terms of when you said forming your Jewish identity could you tell us maybe a bit more about it or a specific situation which would describe that kind of formative stage of your identity?

B I think it was really going to the Jewish primary school and then sort of explaining very simply this is how Jewish people live, what Jewish people do and I sort of absorbed it like a sponge and enjoyed it and embraced it. Then at eight years, yeah I do remember, at eight years old we moved from one part of London to another, just further out North West London. And then I stopped going to a Jewish school, and went to the local state primary school. And on day one the school bully came over to me and introduced himself, he said you're Jewish and I

said yes as I thought everybody in the world was Jewish and he said you killed Christ and I said I didn't even know him, and then he hit me. So that was my first incident of people not liking Jewish people that stuck in my memory. After that I wasn't the world's greatest fighter but I put up a good defence and subsequently we became friends.

S How did it come about, is there a particular action or?

B Yeah I wasn't too bad at soccer, nor was he so we played on the same team. I think if you win people over, it didn't occur to me at the time that being Jewish was an issue. Maybe then it made me realise that not everybody else shared my views.

S So around your teenage years, in terms of talking about your identity and how it was shaped and formed how did you feel about your sexuality or gender identity forming years?

B Okay, as you can probably see I am transgender and it was a struggle my gender identity in my early teens, it was a huge struggle, that was some forty plus years ago and living nowadays we live in far more understanding and tolerant society then maybe there was all that time ago. So I was confused, I was ashamed of my gender incongruence in my mind and did my best to push it away and not deal with it.

S Is there a particular situation or early memory when you realised, oh you know this was my gender or sexuality, when did it sort of click?

B From about the age of four or five.

S Do you remember a specific situation or some object or person that maybe were looking up to or anything that comes back?

B No I think it's from the age of four or five knowing actually was presenting to society in the wrong gender. I wasn't being true to myself that I wanted to be female but I wasn't I was male, and so I had to demonstrate even more that I was male and push away the female feelings.

S Did you speak to anyone around that time and you know early days child or teenage years?

B No, No I didn't speak to anybody about it until I was in my early to mid-twenties, and even then that was only probably to my partner. ...So nobody else because I suppose we all have our own inner most secrets, things we keep within us. I was ashamed, I was not wishing to have this gender conflict, I was wanting to not have this conflict within myself, but it just doesn't go away.

S If you go back to those sort of years around your twenties, how much did your faith or religion play a part in the decisions you made at that time in your life?

B I think certainly in choosing my life partner, religion and faith had a big call and it's important, it was important to me then as it is now but it is now. But I share my life with a partner who's Jewish. Moving that on from my kids it would be great if they could find themselves partners who are Jewish, if not then I won't lose the relationship with my children but I would be disappointed. However I wouldn't share that disappointment with them. I've had a very fortunate relationship with my partner, and we keep semi-kosher at home, so the meats kosher except we smuggle in a bit of sea food. We don't eat anything, any {inaudible} from the pig that's just my choice.

S So the recent years, or the looking on years from your marriage and bringing up children, was there any specific

moment in your life that changed so to say? A breaking point? Could you tell us about this breaking point?

B Okay, I think all of my life I have suffered with clinical depression, was is a pretty miserable illness and I've had three major bouts. The first when I was twelve years old, but didn't really know it at the time. The second when I was thirty two years old at that time I was a partner in a large firm of accounts, on the fast track earning seriously good money and I lost my job because of the depression. So I went off and opened my own practice and I ran that for twenty plus years until 2008 when I had my third and most serious bout of depression. During this time I had loads of analysis with lots of doctors, but underlying I know the real root cause of the depression, which was my gender issues, but I chose not to share them. I started seeing a lady for something called cognitive behaviour therapy which is a talking therapy, and it worked for me. When my dad, my dad passed away in 2011, January 2011, and my sister, my baby sister had contracted breast cancer about eight years before and sadly that came back in her liver. And then I decided maybe life's too short, I don't know how many years I've got left but these gender issues where something I needed to address, so I took myself off to see the relevant gender psychiatrist who diagnosed gender dysphoria and two years later here I am transitioned, starting to live my life twenty four seven female. So the short answer is the mile stone in my life is losing my dad, who I know would have been cool with what I am doing and seeing my sister so ill.

S So, talking about these two years, the span of these two years, do you remember maybe three situations that were the strongest so in terms of in your development, like actually coming out with your gender identity, taking that decision to

where you are today? Something that was important in those two years?

B Yeah I think the first time, as a child when I was fourteen, fifteen I would go out dressed as female and in the 1970's that was cool because I had long hair, it was not a problem, although society was not as accepting, really the decision to go out dressed as a female was July 2010, I had been encouraged by the therapist to do that. So I went to Manchester where there is a big transgender event called 'Sparkle', and I came out of this hotel and I remember being absolutely petrified thinking that the national press would be there to photograph me and splash me across page three of the newspaper, the police were going to be there to arrest me and there would be fifty plus jobs there to beat me up. But the world didn't stop, the world was great and I had the most fabulous weekend and I was dressed as Bella twenty four seven, I remember driving back on Sunday and having to change back into male mode and it was a feeling like the last day of the school holidays where your stomach would sink and I really didn't want to go back into male mode, but circumstances at that stage were, I wasn't ready to transition so that was probably the first incident. Second incidence was going to 'LIMMUD', 'LIMMUD' is a cross cultural, sorry a cross Jewish conference held every year and they had some LGBT- lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender sessions. And I went there and met certain people who introduced me to a synagogue in London where they were quite accepting of my gender and my, and how I'm presented and they were non-judgemental. So the first time I went to a seder night I think was round about probably March 2012 and it was just brilliant. It made me realise that actually I could live in society and protect my Jewish heritage and faith within the Jewish religion because I had always up til then, been a member of the United

Synagogue, conservative branch and I wasn't sure on their reaction on my gender transformation, transition. And the third incidence was the decision to live my life full time female which took place, well it just happened quite frankly. I told the guys I worked with and they were reasonably understanding and then somebody was indiscrete and breached my confidence so I was 'outed', so then I decided they had done me a favour, so out I came and began living full time. The downside which I haven't mentioned is the dilemma that on the one hand I have inner peace and happiness and I am being true to myself, but on the other hand I am hurting four people- my partner, my two children, my mum who are struggling to come to terms with my transition.

S Would you like to share with us moments oh how your family life has changed ever since that decision, two years ago?

B Yeah, I think my partner is an ostrich, she sticks her head in the sand and thinks that, thinks that things won't happen, that it's not happening. Whilst I was, in the last two years pre, pre transition I was being female certainly one or two three days a week, she was okay with that as long as I was reverting back to the male role. And she, I think, thought I wouldn't transition fully. Since I have done she is not in a good place as I mentioned before she is the nicest person I know and somebody I used to enjoy sharing my life with. Sadly now she has quite difficulty in being able to accept my transition and that effects the whole dynamics of the relationship between us. I'm not sure at this stage whether, I really hope we can continue living together, having a lovely warm friendship and companionship that we had but I fear I have lost that. And that is a big loss. My children, my son he moved away from home about a year and a half ago and he is making a lot of effort to try and come to terms with it, but it is not easy to see his dad

dressed female, but he is trying really hard, and I know the relationship will continue but just change in ways. My daughter, bless her, at twenty five years old has always been a handful, I suppose, well I've found girls are more difficult to bring up than boys. She has caused some issues at home, and eventually I made her an offer that she couldn't refuse, which she would move out and live with friends and I would fund her rent, which I am doing. And yeah we are getting closer, she's making some effort, we go out to eat and I suppose the kids are struggling with what to call me and I'm struggling for what they will call me as well, but I will always be their dad, and I'm always there for them, it's tough.

S Is there anything else you see for your future as Bella, in this community, with your family?

B Yeah, maybe I'm naïve and simplistic but really I just want to carry on my life, having changed gender roles. I've managed that, I think, reasonably well at work, so, I have quite a large client following and the reaction has been very positive, all they see is my brain and my abilities remain the same, it's just that I present in a different gender. Its early days, I've only been living full time female for four five weeks but this seems to be a, when I meet my clients or people for the first time I spend five or ten minutes putting them at their ease and then it's cool and not a problem. Going back to the question, I just want to carry on living my life as I was before but in a comfortable gender role and with my loving family around me, my Jewish heritage and identity preserved.

S Thanks for sharing your story with us, as a sort of last question any message you would like to send out into the world, anything from your heart you'd like to share with us?

B I think we live in an enlightened country and enlightened times. And if you would have said to me maybe five or ten years ago I could be living my life being true to myself, doing everyday things being so comfortable I would have doubted it very much, and thank goodness that I am actually able to live my dream. So thank you.

S Thank you Bella.