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—BETTY DEGENERES, Ellen's mother, is a national LGBT rights advocate and the author of *Love, Ellen* and *Just a Mom*

My Daughter He

Transitioning With Our
Transgender Children

CANDACE WALDRON

Early Reviews for *My Daughter He*:

"It was fascinating to go along on this journey with Candace and her child. Meeting parents with trans children, either in person or through this book, is life changing and exceedingly helpful for the parents and child. Comprehensive. Authentic. Compelling. A must read for all new parents!"

—**PAM GARRAMONE**, *Executive Program Director, Greater Boston PFLAG (Parents, Families, and Friends of LGBTQ People)*

"Candace Waldron has written a book for everyone! *My Daughter He* should be required reading not only for parents and family members of trans children, but for teachers, counselors, and school administrators. In fact, all of us will benefit from the information in these pages. Besides being an education, it's a story that keeps you on the edge of your seat. I couldn't put it down. All my love to the brave young man, Kai."

—**BETTY DEGENERES**, *Ellen's mother, is a national LGBT rights advocate and the author of Love, Ellen: A Mother/Daughter Journey and Just a Mom*

"In *My Daughter He*, Candace Waldron bravely delves into the new frontier of autobiographical writing by parents of transgender children. By sharing her own transition journey and that of her trans son, including issues around safety, schools, and mental health, Waldron has created an informative and comforting resource for other families."

—**RACHEL PEPPER**, *therapist and gender specialist living and practicing in Oakland, CA, coauthor of The Transgender Child: A Handbook for Families and Professionals and editor of Transitions of the Heart: Stories of Love, Struggle, and Acceptance by Mothers of Transgender and Gender Variant Children*

"A groundbreaking resource for parents and educators that blends the emotional journey of parents with strategies for transitioning and the urgent need for safe schools."

—**JEFF PERROTTI**, *founder and director of Massachusetts' Safe Schools Program for LGBTQ students and coauthor of When the Drama Club Is Not Enough: Lessons from the Safe Schools Program for Gay and Lesbian Students*

"In *My Daughter He*, Candace Waldron takes us on a remarkable journey revealing the deepest inner chambers of her own experience as a mother shepherding her daughter, Kendra, from a burgeoning recognition that Kendra was not the gender everyone thought her to be, to the blossoming of her young adult transgender son, Kai. With honesty, fortitude, and openness to sharing the good, the bad, and the ugly, she teaches us the simple but so complicated truth about our gender-creative, transgender children: It is not for us to say, but for us to listen to what they are telling us about who they are. Once we hear what they are saying, we have only one job: to help them get to be that person. With no sugarcoating, *My Daughter He* gives us a window into exactly how this can be done. This book is a must for anyone who wants support for or insight into the path that must be taken, by parent, child, and everyone around them, if our transgender youth and young adults are going to have the full opportunity to be the wonderful people they are."

—DIANE EHRENSAFT, PHD, *Director of Mental Health, Child and Adolescent Gender Center, University of California, San Francisco, and author of Gender Born, Gender Made: Raising Healthy Gender-Nonconforming Children*

"*My Daughter He* is guaranteed not only to open your mind to aspects of gender you never considered but also to give you an in-depth emotional analysis of what it is to be transgender or the parent of a gender nonconforming child. The author is able to build an intimate narrative that truly involves and moves the reader beyond its format of a personal, step-by-step, self-help guide for the parents of transgender children. You will embrace the rainbow of gender and the beauty of humanity as never before. After all, as Waldron says: 'In many ways gender is the last frontier of our human capacity to embrace diversity.'"

—JOHN BOETTJER, *newsletter of Gay Social Network of Southwest Florida, July 2014*

My Daughter He

Transitioning With Our Transgender Children

CANDACE WALDRON



**My Daughter He:
Transitioning With Our Transgender Children**

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*To my mother, Maryetta Grace Prior Waldron,
whose unconditional love for children
extended beyond her own family.*

Acknowledgments

Friends, family, and allies grasped my hand along this journey just as Kendra used to hold me tight on our walks in the woods. On the other end of the phone, beside me in the woods, over a cup of tea, or held in my mind until we had a chance to catch up, their presence made the difference.

Knowing there are people we can count on helps blunt the piercing edges of life. Like midwives, the women who coached this book into the world are my oldest and dearest friends. Joanna Duda, Lisa Dodson, Char Wendel, and Carol Szatkowski were also my insightful, honest, compassionate, and probing editors. Writing is a solitary experience, especially a book as personal as this, and without guidance I would have become lost in the wilderness. These dear friends knew how to bring me back to the path that has become this book and hopefully a useful resource for other parents.

Life sometimes surprises, bringing people to us just when we need them. Ellen Szabo sent a letter for an entirely different reason and over coffee I learned she was a writing coach. After reading an early manuscript for this book, she encouraged me when I might have quit. I have relied upon her skillful editing ever since. Shannon Bodie at BookWise has been a critical resource and a delight to work with. Publishing a first book is daunting and I have consulted with Shannon on everything from design and marketing to paper and binding. Without her creativity and publishing expertise, this book might have remained a Word document. Thanks are also due to Palma Odano for her keen attention to detail and line edit precision.

Family forms our very first circle of support. I was blessed with Sandy, Donna, and Debbie, my three amazing sisters, who always created a loving, accepting circle for my children no matter their differences. Their willingness to learn about gender identity along with me and seamlessly change names and pronouns in their families without skipping a beat kept our circle whole.

Grandparents hold an outer circle, with their perspective of history, change, and time. Iyine Montout John, Tony's mother, gave Kai her blessing before she passed. Her acceptance, spanning generation, culture, country, and religion, gave him hope. Roz, my aunt, was a blessing for me, being the mother I needed after my mother passed. Her spirituality, advice, sense of humor, love, and care for my children continues to this day. And I am thankful for my Dad's loyalty, love, and gentle acceptance even when he admits he doesn't understand.

I am especially thankful for my daughter, Denali. Her wisdom, loyalty, strength of character, determination, and sense of humor amaze me. She brightens my life with adventure, love, and joy. I am grateful to Tony, my husband and life-partner, for his generosity of spirit, courageous insights, often different from my own and wiser, and his exuberant embrace of life. We made it through some very difficult days and his optimism held out hope better times would come. And they have!

I am grateful for Kai's love, strength, steadfastness, and courage and that he survived my misunderstandings and mistakes. I am thankful for the many lessons I learned on this shared journey of transformation.

And I am thankful for the love and courage of all parents and family members who stand by and support their gender nonconforming and transgender children, teen, and adult kin on their journey toward authentic self-expression to welcome and embrace a daughter or son in honesty, humanity, and joy.

Together we create an ever-widening circle of friends, family, and allies.

Contents

	Introduction	1
1	Anticipation and Attachment	11
	Recollections	
	Research	
	• Sex Is in the Body; Gender Is in the Mind	
	• When Is Gender Identity Formed?	
	• How Is Gender Identity Formed?	
	• Who Decides Gender?	
	Reflections	
2	Awareness of Difference	43
	Recollections	
	Research	
	• Early Clues	
	Reflections	
	• Observe • Engage • Safety Planning	
	• Family Backgrounds • Questioning Our Parenting • Self-Talk • Your Other Children	
3	Asking Questions	69
	Recollections	
	Research	
	• Gender Identity vs. Sexual Orientation	
	• Diagnosis • Standards of Care and Gender Counseling • Prevalence	
	Reflections	
	• Listen • Learn • Negotiating Parenting	
	• Gender Specialist • Communicate and Connect • Your Other Children • Self-Care	

4 Acknowledging Feelings 113

Recollections

Research

- The Crisis of Puberty • Disclosure
- Stages of Emergence

Reflections

- Responding to Disclosure
- Let Feelings Surface • Your Child's Needs Come First • Dismantle Transphobia
- Honor Your Process Toward Acceptance
- Your Other Children • Self-Care

5 Accessing Help and Aligning Goals 153

Recollections

Research

- Health Risk Indicators • Standards of Care and Treatment • Timing Treatment

Reflections

- Identify Resources • Your Treatment Team
- Dating and Safe Sex • Your Other Children
- Your Allies • Self-Care

6 Acceptance and Action Steps 201

Recollections

Research

- Horizontal Identities • Family Acceptance

Reflections

- Deciding for Our Children
- Supporting the Whole Child • Telling
- Your Other Children

7	Amazement and Advocacy	253
	Recollections	
	Research	
	• Transforming Schools	
	• Identification Documents • Health Care	
	• Family Equilibrium	
	Reflections	
	• Safety Concerns • Your Own Transformation	
	• Becoming an Advocate	
	Endnotes	279
	Appendices	285
	A. Glossary of Terms	
	B. References	
	C. Resources and Support	
	D. Advocacy Issues	
	Index	301
	About the Author	307

Introduction

Children change their parents. *My Daughter He: Transitioning With Our Transgender Children* is the story of how my gender nonconforming child pushed me to grow in ways I never knew I needed. Children who are gender nonconforming are those whose behavior, speech, or dress defy culturally prescribed gender norms. They march to the beat of their own inner drum often from the moment of birth, and no amount of persuasion, parental role modeling, or peer pressure can dissuade them from their unique expressions of gender. Transgender children are those whose gender identity does not match their anatomy.

Parents face a transformative journey when their child doesn't conform to gender norms. Loving support for our child is weighted against the judging eyes of others, fears for our child's safety, and questions about our own competence as parents. If your child is gender nonconforming you may be asking where this will lead. If your child or teen has said they wish they were another gender, you may wonder why it's so gut wrenching to hear that the gender of their perfect body is wrong.

My Daughter He: Transitioning With Our Transgender Children is written to help guide you through your own change process so that you can be your best to support your child. The goal of this book is to share the story of how I traversed the difficult terrain that you might face today. With the advantage of hindsight I know more now than I did when my journey began. My daughter was gender nonconforming since early childhood, but it wasn't until she hit puberty and her bright spirit dimmed that I began to understand her inner pain and embarked on my own process of transformation. *My Daughter He* recounts the lengthy road I took to find the resources and guidance to understand my child's gender nonconformity and support her gender transition. It also explores my journey through

fear, resistance, and sorrow over losing my daughter, until I finally reached peace, acceptance, and gratitude for my son. In my search for understanding, I have read widely in the field, bringing together much of what I wish I'd known at the start. Drawing on this research and recollecting my own experience, I reflect on the many questions, choices, and decisions you may face on your path.

If you feel overwhelmed with a confusing mix of emotions, you are not alone. Every parent with a gender nonconforming or transgender child has wrestled with a range of difficult emotions. You may be relieved to finally know what's at the root of your child's sadness while experiencing your own fears, questions, and feelings of loss. You may wonder how you and your family will get through this. You may feel unprepared and unsure of your next steps. Other parents have lived through this experience and their children are now happy and healthy. Some parents are living through it right now. Your love for your child and your desire for his or her happiness will lead the way.

I hope that *My Daughter He: Transitioning With Our Transgender Children* will be a valuable resource for you. It is the book I wish I'd had a decade ago when my journey began. I might have responded differently had I been more informed and prepared. I wrote this book to pass on some of my hard-learned lessons and hope they help you as you face your own extraordinary, challenging, and potentially transformative journey with your unique and creative child. In addition to my own story, extensive research, and reflections, the appendices contain a glossary of terms, a list of references, and websites for support, advocacy, and medical care.

While there is still much to be done, never before has society been more receptive to the needs of transgender children and teens. Never before have there been more resources and medical options. And never before has our need for information been greater as we parents confront the responsibility of making transition decisions on behalf of our children. Decisions we make today will have a lifelong impact on our children and many of us worry we might get it wrong.

Terminology

I have chosen to use *transgender* throughout this book since it is the current, preferred, inclusive term for individuals whose gender identity and expression or behavior differs from conventional expectations for their anatomical sex. *Gender identity* refers to a person's inner sense of self as male, female, both, neither, or somewhere in between. *Gender expression* (or *presentation*) refers to the way a person communicates their gender to others through name, clothing, mannerisms, body language, speech patterns, voice, hairstyle, and behavior. The dictionary defines *trans* as meaning “across, on the other side, change, or beyond” so you can think of transgender people as transcending gender and the socially constructed limits we place around it. Transgender children are not confined by the dictates of society for how they think of themselves and present themselves in the world. They color outside the lines of gender expectations and in doing so they transgress social norms. While transgender children are similar to one another in their nonconformity, their internal motivation may vary from one another and evolve over time.

One child's gender nonconformity may be an expression of their difference from prescribed gender roles and expectations while another child's may be an early indication of internal feelings of dissonance between mind and body concerning gender. In other words, some transgender children are comfortable in their bodies while others are not. For some children, feelings of dissonance can increase with age creating discomfort and anxiety; what medical and mental health professionals term *gender dysphoria*.

A transgender person who eventually seeks medical treatment (hormone therapy and/or medical procedures) to bring their body into conformity with their gender identity is technically termed *transsexual*. This term is seldom used today because it assumes only two polarized genders: girl or boy; woman or man; whereas transgender makes room for a rainbow of other possibilities inclusive

of transsexuals. *Gender transitioning* is the term used for the multi-step process of moving from living as one gender to another. *Social transitioning*, which is reversible, includes changing one's name, pronoun, dress, body language, speech, and hairstyle. Gender transitioning may also include physical changes such as hormone therapy and medical procedures to modify one's body to conform to one's gender identity. For a complete glossary of other terms see Appendix A.

Transitions

Our job as parents of a gender nonconforming child is to help them help us understand what their gender nonconformity means and how best to create a path for them in a gender confining world. A parent's journey begins well before a child's birth since our own conscious and unconscious expectations impact our ability to perform this critical task. Our own capacity for growth and change determines how well we will do. As with all journeys, the place from which we begin determines the distance we must travel.

I considered myself an open-minded and progressive person so I was not overly concerned with my daughter's early gender nonconformity. I interpreted it in ways I could embrace and even celebrate. It was not until I finally realized her desire to become a boy that I balked. Unlike some parents who take their child's desire to transition in stride, I was tenaciously attached to the birth gender of my child. I loved having a daughter and was reluctant to let her go. I had to embark on a painful journey within that led to my own gradual transformation and eventual acceptance. Looking back I see now that I traveled through several phases of awareness, pulled along, sometimes kicking and (silently) screaming, by my son's own journey of emergence. In an effort to describe these phases of my journey I have arranged them chronologically by chapter:

Chapter One:	Anticipation and Attachment
Chapter Two:	Awareness of Difference
Chapter Three:	Asking Questions
Chapter Four:	Acknowledging Feelings
Chapter Five:	Accessing Help and Aligning Goals
Chapter Six:	Acceptance and Action Steps
Chapter Seven:	Amazement and Advocacy

At times the path felt like an ever-deepening spiral or labyrinth as I became more aware of myself, and my child. I circled back to earlier places, jumped ahead to imagine the future, and then regained my footing in the present. It was hardly a linear route. There was hopeful forward motion and progress even when I found myself doubling back to revisit an old trail. No part of the journey, however painful or frightening, lasted forever.

Each of the seven chapters is organized into three sections:

Recollections of my own experiences with my child who grew from a gender nonconforming daughter, to a transgender teen living as both girl and boy, to eventually transitioning to become my son.

Research by professionals in academia, medicine, and psychology, as well as memoirs of people who've transitioned, and advocates working for transgender human rights.

Reflections on the journey I took, weaving together what I learned from my reading and what I experienced as a parent, will hopefully lend insights for your own journey with your gender nonconforming or transgender child or teen.

Journaling is one of the ways I observe and make sense of my life. It helps me pay attention to the voice inside that witnesses rather than acts. It's one way to digest life's experiences in an effort to gain

perspective and understanding. Journaling was also an attempt to slow time and hold onto precious moments with my child so I took care to record events and snippets of conversation over the years. These journals proved critical in piecing together the shared history and tandem stories that appear in this book. It is also how I reconstructed the sections of dialogue, most of which was done by memory with help from quotes I recorded at the time.

As my daughter's desire to transition mounted, journaling was also my refuge and outlet for unearthing painful feelings and examining their roots. Writing through tears I unraveled the tangled knot of emotions to make sense of the source and neutralize the power of these overwhelming feelings. Once they were recorded in stark black and white, as daybreak dispels fears in the dark, I felt the weight of them lift. Writing was an outlet for my feelings, freeing me to be present for my child and supportive of his journey, instead of being mired in my own ruminations.

Transitions are difficult, sometimes fraught with complications. When a child challenges a parent's understanding about a matter as basic as gender, and refuses to dress or act in ways consistent with social norms, or discloses that they feel themselves to be a different gender than the one assumed and assigned at birth, everyone close to that child is affected. And if the child or teen then wants to transition their outward appearance to more closely reflect their inner sense of self, their parents, siblings, and extended family members must also transition. These family members must change their assumptions, opening their minds and their hearts as they get to know and accept the new form that their loved one has taken. They must also let go of the child or teen they've known. In childbirth the transition phase is when the mother's cervix opens and her body requires her active participation in pushing the baby toward birth. If you are a parent of a transgender child, you are called upon once again for openness and active participation as you help your child birth him- or herself.

Pronouns

Pronouns make or break a transgender person's sense of self, helping them feel recognized and seen or isolated and invisible. My use of pronouns throughout this book is intentional. Because there is no gender neutral singular pronoun in English, I have chosen to use "they" with singular nouns such as child. Despite being grammatically clumsy, it is preferable to forcing a limited choice between "he" or "she" for those who are gender nonconforming. When writing about my child's years from birth to age eighteen, I use the name we gave her at birth, Kendra, and the pronoun "she" because that is how I knew her and how others saw her. From sixteen to eighteen Kendra was trying on what it felt like to emerge in the world as "he," congruent with how he had always felt inside. From eighteen to twenty we knew Kendra identified as male but was still working on a name change. Peers from school still knew him as female while strangers readily identified him as male. This was an androgynous period when we were still saying "Kendra" while moving between masculine and feminine pronouns depending on the context. When writing about the years from age twenty onward I use the name he chose for himself, Kai, and the pronoun "he" as others were now getting to know him.

He would say that he was always male but since this is the story of how I came to learn that truth, the change in pronouns was a central and painful passage in my journey. I had a relationship with Kendra, my daughter, and I had to develop a relationship with Kai, my son. Using "he" when speaking about the person I had always known as "she" felt distancing and estranged. I felt I was referring to a totally different person; certainly not to someone as close to me as my own child. The intentional and gradual change in pronouns in the story that follows is a more accurate portrayal of my own process of letting go of Kendra and getting to know and accept Kai. It invites the reader to experience the boy emerging from the girl in somewhat the way that I did.

Family Members

We all have our own story that only we can tell. The experience of having a gender nonconforming or transgender family member can impact each person in a family in different and unique ways. This is my story. I purposely do not attempt to tell the story of my daughter Denali, or my husband, Tony. We each have our own reflections and perspectives about how Kai's gender identity altered the terrain of a sister's relationship with her sibling, a father's relationship with his child, and the very fabric of our lives. This book leaves those stories for them to tell if they so choose. I do not attempt to tell Kai's story except as his journey of awareness impacts my own. In my telling, I draw on the experiences of my family only in general ways to reflect on some of the challenges that can arise between parents and siblings when a child is transgender. This is the story of one mother with permission and approval from my son.

Race

Race and gender define us. In a culture obsessed with marketing, they are our packaging. When meeting us, others make judgments based on these two characteristics before we even speak. In addition to being transgender, my son is biracial so as a white, gender conforming woman raising a mixed race child in a white community, I was beyond my depth on two critical counts. I had no direct experience with how frequently, palpably, and powerfully race bias is communicated through looks, comments, behaviors, and attitudes. Kai had felt it since he was little and as perceptive as he was, nothing went unnoticed.

Race, like gender, is a social construct developed in relationship to others to establish who belongs and who does not; who has power and who does not. Those of us in the racial majority cannot appreciate the impact race has on social acceptance until we travel to a country where we are in the minority. For a child of color,

developing racial identity in America means coming to terms with the signals that others send about whether or not you count and belong. It means reading cues to learn whom you can trust and where you are safe, rather than assuming access is equal. Being multiracial adds another layer of complexity since neither the white nor the black community may fully claim you as its own.

The emerging sense that he was also a gender minority further threatened Kai's hopes of ever belonging; of finding one's kin. Few of Kai's peers understood or showed interest in learning the agility and tenacity it takes to navigate in the cross currents of race and gender. Few of the adults in our lives, whether friends or professionals, have charted these multilayered waters either.

I often felt lost in my efforts to support and guide Kai, having empathy, often anger over injustices, but little wisdom or lived experience to offer. Years of diversity training at work, my husband, and insightful friends and colleagues who taught me through words, example, and courageous confrontation about my own privilege and blinders, helped make me a more conscious white person willing to examine how oppression operates. It takes a village to raise our children and the people of color, and the gay, lesbian, gender nonconforming people in my life were critical resources in helping me be a better parent.

Labels

Labels by those who are not transgender (also called cisgender people, *cis* meaning on the same side and *trans* meaning on the other side) have historically been used to describe the transgender experience. Most have been negative, hurtful, and uninformed. Just as men have historically described and diagnosed women and whites have labeled and objectified people of color, cisgender people have put themselves forth as experts on transgender issues. This has contributed to the widespread impression that being transgender is

disordered, deviant, aberrant, and pathological simply because it is not the experience of the majority of people.

To know a transgender person from infancy as we parents do is to dispel that myth. Our children are like other children, except for the disconnect they feel between the gender assumed and assigned at birth based on their anatomy, and the gender they feel inside. There are so many positive words we can use to describe our gender nonconforming children that I encourage you to explore some of the possibilities: gender creative,¹ expansive, fluid, ingenious, transcendent, expansive, imaginative, unique, distinctive, original, exceptional, inventive, resourceful, artistic, fearless, innovative, insightful, and gifted, to name a few. The next time you discuss your child's unique understanding or expression of gender, whether with a healthcare provider, teacher, babysitter, family member, neighbor, or friend, try using some of these, make up your own, or better yet, let your transgender child name their own experience of gender and let's begin altering and expanding the awareness of others.



Denali and Kendra

About the Author



Photo: Cheryl Coonty

Candace Waldron, MDiv, is an educator, administrator, and public policy advocate in violence prevention and women's health. She has served as executive director of a domestic violence agency, director of women's health in a community hospital and the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, and coordinator of a rape crisis center. Gender equality has

been foundational in Waldron's professional pursuits yet even so, she felt unprepared when her adolescent daughter disclosed being transgender. She wrote *My Daughter He* to help other parents be better equipped and more informed when parenting their nonconforming or transgender children and currently cofacilitates PFLAG support groups for parents in the Boston area.

Thank you for reading *My Daughter He*. I hope you found it helpful and inspiring for wherever you are on your journey and invite you to tell a friend, share a post, or write a review on Amazon or Goodreads. Sharing stories of love for our nonconforming and transgender children, adolescents, and adults, can educate others, change attitudes, and make safer schools and communities for everyone.

If you would like to continue the conversation about how best to support our unique and creative children, connect with other parents, or find more in-depth suggestions about working with schools or advocating for policies, please visit my website at **www.candacewaldon.com**.

Thanks and best wishes,
Candace Waldron

"This book is a must for anyone who wants support for or insight into the path that must be taken, by parent, child, and everyone around them, if our transgender youth and young adults are going to have the full opportunity to be the wonderful people they are."

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My Daughter He: Transitioning With Our Transgender Children

is both a story and a resource. Written by a mother reflecting on her own difficult journey to accept that her beloved daughter longed to be a boy, *My Daughter He* explores the labyrinthine path many parents travel: supporting their child's authentic self-expression while experiencing deep-seated emotions of their own. Topics include:

- Finding the right team of professionals to guide your decisions
- Reversible and irreversible treatment options and if and when to begin them
- Self-care strategies and support for siblings
- Networking with other parents to create safe schools and communities

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