

*Heels, hose, and a tie*

# SKIRTING AN ISSUE? CROSS-DRESSING AND THE LDS CHURCH

By Brittny Goodsell Jones

*Some details, such as names, have been changed for privacy reasons.*

**O**N CHRISTMAS MORNING 2007, DANIEL JENSEN was handed a present wrapped in red, holly-patterned paper. The box, shipped from Utah, came from his sister-in-law, who had drawn his name for Christmas. Daniel sat by the tree. His wife, Monica, sat on the couch to catch his reaction on the video camera. Unaware of anything else, their two children, one- and three-year-old boys, were busy inspecting their own Christmas treasures.

Daniel opened the box.

Inside he found a silver-beaded necklace; a black patterned skirt with silver sparkles; a light-blue blouse with a ribbon to tie into a bow; and a cream-colored, low-cut ribbed sweater.

Daniel's giddy smile, captured on video, shows that this is one of the best gifts he's ever received.

Four months earlier, Daniel had disclosed to his family (including in-laws) a secret he has kept to himself for almost twenty years: he's been a cross-dresser since age ten.

**D**ANIEL GOES TO his California ward each Sunday. He wears a suit, tie, and black shoes. He reads the scriptures and sometimes invites the missionaries over for dinner. Daniel looks like a typical LDS male, and he considers himself an active member of the Church. In the privacy of his home, however, he brings out his female persona, "Debbie."



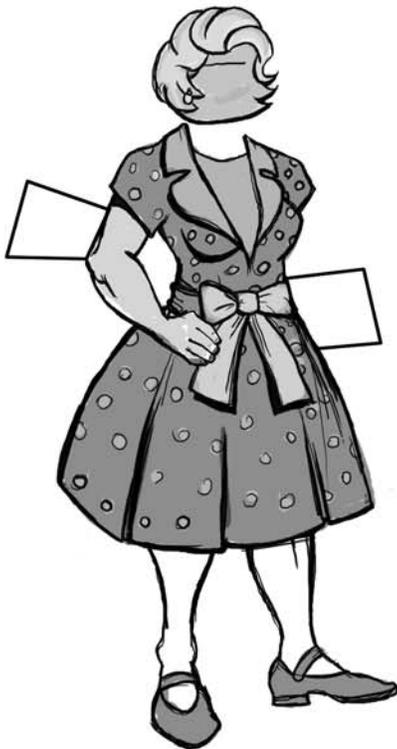
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Daniel buys more makeup than his wife does and owns a jewelry box for his necklaces and bracelets. He owns five pairs of heels, all bought by his wife at Payless Shoes. In men's shoes, he's size 11 but can squeeze into a woman's 13 if that's the biggest size the store carries. When dressed up he crosses his legs while sitting and his voice gets higher. As Debbie, he likes to wear headbands and especially enjoys playing card games with his wife—Debbie is more social than Daniel is. With nylons, fingernail polish and lacy underwear, a shoulder-length wig, and trimmed eyebrows, the only thing that makes Debbie look like a man is a five o'clock shadow, which he said he's getting better at hiding.

Typically, Monica is the only person who sees "Debbie." Monica said she was somewhat aware of Daniel's cross-dressing before marrying him in the LDS temple, and that she's OK with it as long as "Debbie" stays within the boundaries of the house.

Not everyone can be so accommodating, however. Despite his faithful activity in his LDS ward, Daniel said he often feels inadequate and unaccepted because of his cross-dressing secret.

LDS Church statements on cross-dressing are sparse. The Brigham Young University Honor code mentions cross-dressing once under sexual and similar misconduct in its "Live a Chaste and Virtuous Life" section. It states: "The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and BYU affirm that sexual relationships outside the covenant of marriage are inappropriate. Examples include but are not limited to the following: extra-marital relations, promiscuity or predatory behavior, aberrant behavior, solicitation of sex, homosexual conduct, and cross-dressing." Less specifically, a search through General Conference archives turns up reminders to set proper examples through distinctive family roles. A first call to the LDS public affairs office about the Church's official stand on cross-dressing elicited a firm "no





comment.” A second call was answered by a woman who, emphasizing that she is not an official spokesperson, said, “I don’t know why you are interested. An active member wouldn’t be a part of that.”

Though cross-dressers rarely share their habit with anyone besides their spouse, that doesn’t mean cross-dressing isn’t out there, says D. Kim Openshaw, Utah State University associate professor in marriage and family therapy. Usually cross-dressers want to keep the behavior in a context that is more socially acceptable as well as private. “Religion plays a facet because it creates a moral perception of right and wrong,” he explains.

Guilty reactions to one’s cross-dressing often turn into self-loathing, says Lee Beckstead, a psychologist who works at Aspen Grove Counseling in Salt Lake City. Cross-dressers start to withdraw from themselves, and that brings in self-denial and self-hatred. “You learn to hate yourself to survive,” Beckstead says. “You think that wouldn’t be helpful, but it is. Hating yourself or your cross-dressing is a way to contain it, they think.”

But it’s a solution that becomes a problem. Soon, Beckstead said, a binge-and-purge cycle develops. Cross-

dressers binge because it’s hard to deny wanting to dress up. After the binge, horrible guilt creeps in, and the cross-dresser promises to never do it again. Through that promise, cross-dressers feel better about themselves. They might even throw away all their opposite-gender clothes.

Afterward, they feel like good LDS spouses again. But, just as in dieting, a person eventually gets hungry, Beckstead says. Desires and needs come forward, and the binge starts over. “That works really well with the religious framework—you’re a good person when you’re not sinning and you’re a bad person when you are sinning. That cycle works for quite some time but then starts breaking down and attacks self-esteem and confidence.”

This process has two costs: withdrawing from self and withdrawing from others. A cross-dresser commonly isolates him or herself, avoids people, lies, and sometimes discriminates against other sexual minorities just to publicly say, “I’m not one of them.” After a lifetime of isolation and hiding, cross-dressers can feel like monsters or out-of-control perverts, Beckstead says, and suicide can become an attractive option. “Nobody would want them, so of course killing themselves would be much better than having the re-

jection from the family or even the family name being tainted. It's all based in the assumption that [cross-dressing] is wrong and it can be controlled or gotten rid of."

Daniel reports that he has experienced this isolation since his cross-dressing habit started. He constantly feels as if no one knows him. During 2006, he felt so bad that he contemplated suicide. He made sure his life insurance was in place and even planned how he would take his life. In a cry for help, he overdosed one evening on Valium and lay down on the living room floor. Monica called poison control who warned her that he would have to go to the emergency room if he fell asleep. Throughout the evening, he tried to doze off but visiting family kept him awake by making him move around and talk.

After this event, Daniel and Monica decided it was time to visit a therapist. The therapist suggested Daniel find a communication outlet by joining a support group, talking to a friend, or letting a family member in on the secret. Daniel knew it was time.

He contacted his sister first because she had been his protector growing up. Long pauses filled the phone conversation before Daniel could tell her. "My heart was racing at a million miles per hour, and I got really hot and dizzy," he recalls. Over the phone, Daniel couldn't read his sister's facial expressions and was uncertain of her reaction to his revelation. For a few nights afterward, Daniel had difficulty sleeping. However, his sister received his news sympathetically and has since helped Daniel come out to others, including his own family.

**W**ITH THE UNDERSTANDING of his loved ones, Daniel feels less isolated, but he is still unsure of his standing in the LDS faith. "If the Church suddenly becomes more aware of [cross-dressing], will they just instantly expect me to stop?" he asked. "Because that just won't happen. It's as much a part of who I am as anything. I consider myself an active Mormon. I just wonder when something will change, because we could get more strict and then suddenly I will not be able to be a Mormon."

Beckstead said a few LDS cross-dressers find a way to maintain their religion by re-evaluating their gender beliefs. "I think some of them say, 'Well, my religion doesn't understand that, so I put it on the back burner,'" he explains. "I think that's a healthy way to help it; but for many, going to church is painful because of the gender-traditional talk that keeps going on." To sidestep gender-traditional talk, Beckstead said cross-dressers can develop resources inside themselves and create safe spaces for their beliefs. A social resource such as a relative or friend could also be developed as a safe space. These spaces are important when cross-dressers don't feel enough validation from the outside world—here cross-dressers can receive affirmation despite their differences.

However, if cross-dressers are in relationships or have children, some boundaries have to be set, depending on what the cross-dresser considers priorities. Beckstead en-

courages his cross-dressing clients to improve their relationship with themselves. Getting to know their cross-dressing desires at a more accepting, loving level is the most powerful tool when the rest of the world rejects them. At least the cross-dresser can be his own support.

Kevin Mitchell, a client of Beckstead's, has been cross-dressing since he was a teenager. Now married with children, Mitchell still deals with self-loathing and feelings of despair.

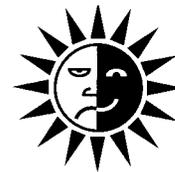
"It's hard to get up and put on a suit," Kevin says. "Really hard. I feel like crying when I do. I avoid it when I can. I don't have a job where I have to wear business clothing for that reason. I seriously feel like throwing up when I think about putting on a Polo shirt. And then I look in the *Ensign*, and what is everyone wearing? Well, the men are wearing Polo's or button-down shirts."

"That is why I don't feel comfortable at church," he continues. "That is why I don't like going. I love the Church, but I hate being treated like a pervert. It hurts to hear that I am a 'bad Mormon.'"

When Mitchell spoke to a bishop and stake president about his cross-dressing and gender identity, he said they didn't know what to do, simply telling him that cross-dressing was unbecoming of a priesthood holder. "I already feel like a monster for not fitting in anywhere. It's hard to go to church every week and hear someone bash gays or transvestites or other people that are trying their hardest to survive," he said.

In California, Daniel still attends church with his wife and children. But he doesn't see things as black and white, the way he did while growing up. He wonders what to do about a church that skirts an issue his life is rooted in. But for now, he has his family.

"[The Christmas present] meant a lot to me," Daniel says. "It was kind of a feeling of total acceptance that someone was going out of their way to give me something they knew I really wanted and really liked. But I have never been able to have that type of present. I didn't even know how to react. I've been so isolated for so long—it was a moment of realization that other people know and are there with me more than anything."



## HAIKU

Off weedy tracks: train  
Cars rusting. From foggy warmth  
The bullfrogs croak

—REBECCA LILLY