

Mike Penner (below) and his GID  
Christine Daniels (right).



## For some, shadow of regret cast over gender switch

By Steve Friess, special for USA TODAY

The day Mike Penner left the *Los Angeles Times* made the news. The longtime sportswriter wrote the article himself, a personal essay explaining that he was taking some time off and, upon his return, he would be known from then on as Christine Daniels.

Penner's public acknowledgment in April 2007 that he was transgender and would soon live as a woman shocked the world of sports journalism and turned his new identity, Daniels, into an instant celebrity. Daniels gave speeches, was profiled in *Sports Illustrated*, collected honors for courage from transgender groups and wrote a blog for the *Times* titled "Woman In Progress."

Except that the transition didn't last. In mid-October 2008, after a lengthy leave of absence, Penner, 51, returned to the sports pages and the *Times* newsroom as a man.

And just as suddenly, Penner's story, heralded in its early days as a triumphant example of transgender progress, has instead become a cautionary tale of the lesser-known phenomenon: transgender regret.

"It's unfortunate and it's relatively uncommon but certainly not unheard of," says Denise Leclair, executive director of the International Foundation for Gender Education, a Waltham, Mass.-based transgender advocacy group. "The simplest way to think about it is being trans is something that never goes away. ... There's just a fairly constant social pressure to just go back. You don't have to be a genius to understand that society doesn't really accept this."

Penner, a 24-year veteran of the newspaper, did not respond to calls and e-mails for comment and has not written about his decision to resume life as a man. The blog and bylines as Christine Daniels have been removed from the newspaper's website.

Though there's no data available on how many transgender people abandon their new gender, psychologist Ron Lawrence of the Community Counseling Center in Las Vegas says about 5% of his transgender patients revert. Leclair echoes that estimate.

## **Adhering to a code**

Transgender advocates say the case of Penner, who never had sex-change surgery, reflects the success of a system in which American sex-change surgeons, adhering to their own code of conduct, won't operate until the patient has had a year of intense psychotherapy while living publicly in the new gender.

"We're required (by doctors) to go through all this stuff for a reason, even though there are a lot of trans people who bristle at being told what they can and can't do," says Donna Rose, a male-to-female postoperative transsexual in Rochester, N.Y. "The thing that people have to understand is that even though Mike decided to retransition, that doesn't mean he's not trans. It's not like you go all of a sudden, 'Uh, I'm better.' Going back doesn't automatically clear the conundrum that causes you to get there in the first place."

Rose reversed course on her own transition at first because her then-wife became so distraught and co-workers were insensitive. Six months later, she went through with it and ended the marriage.

Transitioning carries with it the prospect of losing jobs, friends and family, as well as mockery from strangers who find the gender change visibly jarring, Rose and others attest. "You become a very visible minority," Leclair says. "The average male-to-female transsexual is taller, has bigger hands and feet, has more facial hair than most women. There are a lot of physical attributes that are hard to hide in a society that doesn't like you."

Religion sometimes comes into play. Joseph Cluse of Newport News, Va., lived his life as Joanna for 30 years after having the surgery in the 1970s. Yet Cluse, who was married twice and raised one husband's children, became religious in recent years and decided that God wanted him to resume his life as a man. Cluse, 54, stopped taking hormones and had breast implants removed.

Cases such as Penner and Cluse raise questions about the causes of transgenderism. Paul McHugh, director of the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine in Baltimore, is a leading proponent of the notion that the cause is not biological, that transgender people have chosen this path.

He halted the university hospital's practice of performing gender reassignment surgeries in the late 1970s because, he says, a study indicated that postoperative transsexuals were no happier than they were before the operation. "You can live any way you want, but don't come to us and ask us to give medical resources to this proposal of yours, because we think it's a social construct and not a condition of nature," McHugh says.

"No one has demonstrated any physical mechanism or physical problem that causes this. The burden of proof is on them to prove that."

## **Debating the cause**

Such comments are anathema to the transgender advocates, who insist the decades-old study McHugh cites was debunked. Like most transsexuals, Daniels told *Sports Illustrated* in 2007 that her urges to be female began as a child, and she wrote in the *Times* that same year: "We are born with this. We fight it as long as we can, and in the end it wins."

Claire Winter, a transsexual from Seattle who mentored Penner and spoke to him late last year, doubts the sportswriter's reversal will further confuse the general public about transsexualism.

"I think people are so bloody confused, I don't know if this has a significant effect," Winter says. "But maybe this will help people to understand that this is a very complex, highly difficult situation. This indicates the fundamental problem of trying to shove people into either end of the gender pole. It serves to point out the fact that it isn't as simple as flipping a coin.

"I would say give (Penner) some time," Winter says. "We have to wait for him to let us know when he figures it out."

[http://www.usatoday.com/news/health/2009-02-24-transgender-penner\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/health/2009-02-24-transgender-penner_N.htm)