

Steph's Packed Lunch, Channel 4, 12.30pm, Monday January 4th 2020

Steph: Aged just 14, Keira Bell was diagnosed with gender dysphoria and was referred to the Tavistock centre in London who run NHS England's only Gender Identity Development Service. After 5 1 hour appointments Keira was prescribed puberty blockers. At 17 Keira was then prescribed testosterone which made her grow facial hair and deepened her voice. And at 20 she had a double mastectomy.

In 2019 Keira realised that she'd made a mistake, and in a bid to prevent her experience happening to other young people and children Keira took the clinic that helped her to the High Court and won. And Keira joins me now to tell us about her landmark victory.

I mean how does it feel when you hear me just saying the story of your life over the last 10 years or so, it's incredible isn't it?

Keira: Yeah, yeah definitely feels weird but you know this case doesn't just represent my story. It's affecting so many young girls at the moment and so I'm just thankful I've been able to share my story and people heard it and I've been able to make positive change.

Steph: So, take me back to when you were a teenager how did you feel about yourself then and what made you decide then that you wanted to transition?

Keira: Yeah, during my teens I was really struggling, mental health issues, I was struggling with my sexuality and just struggling generally with not fitting in to the stereotype that girls are supposed to fit in, society says, and so yeah all of this just manifested into gender dysphoria and yeah, I was later seen at the Tavistock.

Steph: And did you know what gender dysphoria was? Did you know, did you feel like you were in the wrong body, is that how you felt?

Keira: Er yeah, yeah, I mean I didn't know the term for it before I kind of looked up online, yeah but once I did it just kinda made sense, I was like yeah, that's me cos it explained everything I was already feeling, I checked every box but yeah, I just discovered it all through the internet, yeah.

Steph: And then as you say you went to the Tavistock centre, now how sure were you at that point, were you 14 at that point?

Keira: So, I was 16 when I was first seen at the Tavistock yeah, and yeah, I was very sure, you know I thought I needed to do that to achieve happiness and to get on with my life, erm but you know obviously later found out that, you know, it was just a case of untangling what had been going on with me beforehand and my childhood and everything like that.

Steph: And were you getting any kind of counselling or anything as well?

Keira: No

Steph: ...or was it just a case of, I mean what did they talk to you about in these appointments you had?

Keira: They were very brief appointments, just kind of uh what was my friendship group like as I was growing up, did I prefer to hang out with boys or girls and you know, what did I like to wear, my hobbies, that sort of thing, so it was very much based on stereotypes and yeah, no psychiatric assessment or anything like that.

Steph: They were each an hour long though so they weren't necessarily brief like that's you know..

Keira: Yeah, well that sometimes involved speaking with my parents as well, well one of my parents, and um again it was, it wasn't in depth, it was just kind of very brief, on the surface discussion, yeah.

Steph: Is there anything though that could have changed your mind at that point, could you have been convinced that maybe transitioning wasn't the right thing for you, or were you adamant that that was what you wanted to do?

Keira: It's hard to say, but yeah, I was very adamant and again, once teenagers think they've found a solution to something then you know they will kind of you know, they won't let go of that idea and I was very much in that position, um which is why I think it's important that the institutional changes are made so that they can't make those sorts of decisions so early and so young.

Steph: There will be some adults who've transitioned as an adult who wish that they could have transitioned as a child..

Keira: Yeah

Steph: ...what would you say to those people though, because they, not everyone's the same are they, that's a case in point why these things can even happen isn't it?

Keira: Well yeah, I mean everyone wants what they don't have, you know these older adults I'm sure they would feel that way, but you know as the High Court showed, they ruled that children, they can't consent to the treatment because of the nature of the treatment and how life-long it is and how negatively it affects our health, and a lot of the effects are also unknown. And so yeah, it's easy for people who haven't gone through it to say 'oh I wish I had that' but you know, I've been through it and it's not, it wasn't beneficial in any sense.

Steph: I don't think though that anyone who's transitioned would ever say it's easy though would they?

Keira: No, no..

Steph: So it would take a lot to make that decision in the first place, there would be some people out there who think well actually getting this treatment as a child is the best time, because, so they don't go through all of the, you know, as it gets more difficult doesn't it as you get older, as you go through puberty and move further on?

Keira: Yeah, I mean you could say that, but um again, you know, the High Court, well they ruled that you can't consent, so how can a child consent to something that's going to affect their fertility and their sexual function and that sort of thing, so I mean the pay off, I'm not sure how great that is.

Steph: What would you like to see different, like what would have helped you and perhaps changed the outcome for you?

Keira: Er definitely some intensive mental health care, um you know that's the fundamental issue here is we're not receiving proper mental health support and you know this is disproportionately affecting girls at the moment you know. I think there's been a 4000% increase of young girls being referred to the gender identity clinics and so this is a societal issue, something else is going on and the clinics don't know...so yeah, mental health help is the biggest, is the key yeah.

Steph: Yeah, and you feel that you didn't get that

Keira: No

Steph: ...and that's the big difference

Keira: Yeah

Steph: ...in all of this. And how are you now, how do you feel about everything now?

Keira: Well, I'm in a much better position because, uh, I've come away from that and I've stopped the hormones and all of that, so you know, erm, I'm better in that sense, but I have no idea on how things are gonna progress from

here, you know we're all guinea pigs in this, no-one knows, there's no studies or evidence. So I'm just kind of free falling at the moment but yeah, I'm in a much better position because I'm out of it and I'm not confined within gender anymore, you know it's not on my mind in regards to myself personally anymore.

Steph: Well Keira thank you so much for talking to us.

Keira: Thank you so much.

Steph: We did contact the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust about this and they said that they're disappointed by the judgment and they have sought permission to appeal it. They say:

"Our Gender Identity Development Service offers a safe specialist environment for children and young people to explore issues pertaining to their gender identity development."

They say only a minority of those referred to the service progress on to a physical intervention pathway.

"These decisions are highly individual and made with young people with the support of their families.

We are sorry to hear that Keira feels she was not well supported by us and later by adult services.

Our door is always open to her and others who may be reconsidering their journeys."