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Lovers' Hangup With the State



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TONNEA VANCE AND JASON HECKMAN
San Jose transsexuals have found their marriage hopes blocked

By Marshall Kilduff

In many ways, it was a typical love affair—they knocked around the country separately for a few years before meeting and moving into a tiny apartment with plans to marry some day.

But Jason Heckman and Tonnea Vance found their happy hopes of marriage riven by an awkward and painful legal barrier.

They are both transsexuals—persons who have undergone surgery to

to change their sex organs to match their attitudes and mental outlook.

Yet under California law, Tonnea cannot legally change her original birth certificate—which attests she is male—to correspond to her present female appearance and life-style.

Heckman, 33, was able to legally change his Nevada birth certificate and name because state law there recognizes transsexual changes, but in the eyes of

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local law, his lover is still a man.

"We've finally lifted this masquerade, but there is nothing we can do to complete our new lives, to make it official," he said yesterday.

He spoke slowly, in a thin strained voice, pausing to tug on a wispy beard — prompted by heavy hormone doses — and pull on a thick cigar.

He leaned against a wooden bannister on the front stoop of a boarding house in San Jose where the couple rent a room.

SESSION

The two met during a counseling session provided by the Stanford University Medical Center where their operations were performed.

"It was probably the most expensive date ever. It cost us \$10,000 to meet as a man and woman," he laughed. So far, he said, each of them has spent about \$5000 apiece for a series of operations over a period of six months to fashion new sex organs in their bodies.

"But sex is such a small part of being a transsexual. All that we're doing now is finally adjusting our bodies to what our minds have been for so long," he added.

"And now we've finally discovered that everything we've both always felt is true — our love can work out and we can be happy," he said.

"But there are these damn laws that stand in the way after all of it is done," he said.

Since the two are considered of the same sex under California law, their marriage would be illegal.

"We could get married in another state, but it wouldn't be worth the paper it's written on in case of death, divorce or adoptions," Heckman said.

BORN

Heckman was raised as Neva Joy Heckman and went through school in Oakland.

Tonnea, 24, was born Gary Paul Townsend in Glendale. She is still bedridden, recovering from plastic surgery to her face.

"The school doctor in the sixth grade refused to believe I was a girl with my broad shoulders and thin chest," said Heckman.

"He had the school nurse take me aside and examine me closely. When she told him that I was a girl, he couldn't believe it," he added.

SAMPLING

For most of his life, he was driven to sampling different lifestyles to discover where he might find an answer to his problem.

He dated homosexuals, visited religious communities that might tolerate his "problem," and finally found work as a chef.

"I knew I wasn't a woman — but yet here I was with the body of one," he said.

After a luckless string of meetings with psychiatrists, counselors, and priests, he came to Stanford and underwent the surgery. Then he met Tonnea.

"Things, well, blossomed — like love does for anybody I guess," he said shyly.

The two of them, he confessed, even share a modest streak of prudery after all their lifelong difficulties.

"We're both kind of embarrassed about living together, you know," he said, looking away at the ground.

"It's not the way God intended, it's not morally right, for two people to be in love and not be married before they live together," he said.

"But I think that we will see it through. I know that we'll be mates for as long as we live," he added firmly.

Heckman said the couple have not decided on filing suit to overturn state law barring their marriage.

"Right now we're happy — even if it's a little wrong," he said.