

# Cultural Daily

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## Becoming Chaz, Remaking Oprah

Ulli K. Ryder, Ph.D · Wednesday, May 18th, 2011

I like being female, at least most of the time. But even on days when it might be easier to be male (like when I have to walk several blocks in heels), I don't really want to be a man. I just want to be wearing comfortable shoes and am jealous that men's shoes (usually) don't come with the risk of a twisted ankle, sore toes or blisters. I have no idea what it would be like to want to surgically remove my breasts, take hormone injections and otherwise alter my body (and life) completely.

Last week *Becoming Chaz* debuted on OWN (Oprah's new network). The documentary traces the transformation of Sonny and Cher's child from female (Chastity) to male (Chaz). Most of the documentary focuses on Chaz's surgery to remove his breasts. Testosterone injections have already deepened his voice, caused the growth of facial/body hair and changed his features. He notes that his hands have become more masculine. His girlfriend, Jenny, says his face has changed and become more angular. His nose has become harder, she says.

Chaz and Jenny started out five years ago as a lesbian couple. They are now a heterosexual couple. Except Chaz has not had (and may never have) "bottom surgery." While I was struck by the devotion and love that Jenny must have to stay with Chaz through this process, I was also struck by some of her comments that seem to point to more ambivalence than she (and Chaz) may admit. At one point Jenny cries while saying that she "misses" the person she fell in love with and that she doesn't particularly like Chaz's "overpowering male energy." For his part, Chaz admits that testosterone has caused mood shifts, particularly increased aggression. What he doesn't seem to notice is the number of times he tells Jenny to shut up or says that she's crazy.

I get why Oprah chose this documentary to launch the Documentary Club on her network. Transgender identities and sex change operations are provocative and likely to draw an audience. This subject is also in keeping with Oprah's long-standing commitment to discussing difficult subjects. And Chaz has famous parents. Cher even appears in the documentary. But how does this documentary fit with OWN TV's overall mission and programming?

OWN has had a rocky start. Female-centered, wholesome and uplifting, the programming is familiar to anyone who has paid attention to the Oprah show, O Magazine and Oprah Radio. The network is airing some of Oprah's protégées – Dr. Phil, for example. Most of the shows seem to be (no surprise) about health, wellness and living well generally (Suze Orman, *Trading Spaces*, *Gaiam's Wake Up Work Out*). There is also a heavy dose of specials – The Judds, Shania Twain. Gayle King, Oprah's BFF, has her own talk show. Oprah herself appears in such fare as *Behind the Scenes*, *Master Class* and re-runs of the Oprah show. Then there are some seemingly random

shows like *Mystery Diagnosis* and *Say Yes to the Dress*. Viewers can even win the opportunity to host their own webisode. I don't get it. We can watch work out shows, *Say Yes to the Dress*, *Mystery Diagnosis* and *Trading Spaces* on other networks. Dr. Phil is, well, everywhere. Suze Orman is on PBS regularly. YouTube and webcams have made it possible for almost anyone to become a star, without Oprah's help.

[Critiques](#) of OWN TV point out that the shows it airs are generally boring and don't stack up to shows on other female-friendly networks like Lifetime and WE. And there have been big changes at OWN lately. After only four months and with continually falling ratings, Oprah [fired](#) CEO Christina Norman and hired Peter Ligouri (former Discovery Communications COO). Is *Becoming Chaz* part of a push to revamp the network and draw viewers? If so, it might be working. Responses to the documentary on OWN's website have been overwhelmingly positive and supportive of Chaz's transformation. A review on [TV Guide](#) called the documentary "riveting television." Of course, how many documentaries about the transgendered children of celebrities are there? If OWN TV is going to survive – and thrive – it's going to have to find other ways to draw in viewers.

I hope that watching *Becoming Chaz* helps other transgendered individuals. I hope that it helps teach tolerance and understanding. I hope that Chaz and Jenny are able to maintain a healthy relationship. The most telling moment – and the one with which I identified most – was towards the end. Cher had trouble accepting Chastity when she came out as a lesbian and is having even more trouble coming to terms with her new son Chaz. But finally she says that the only way she can understand is to put herself in his position. If she woke up one day and found herself to be a man, she could not get to the surgeon quickly enough. This is the "ah-ha" moment – for Cher and for non-transgendered viewers. What OWN TV needs are more ah-has and fewer ho-hums.

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