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PATHWAYS

Georgina Beyer: How far can you fall?

by Dale Husband

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Georgina Beyer was elected mayor of Carterton in 1995.

None of our MPs — not in recent years anyway — can match the rollercoaster ride of Georgina Beyer in her nearly six decades of colourful, varied, productive and sometimes sad life.

Much of that life has been in the public spotlight when, after some years of street life as a sex worker, then as an entertainer and actor, she made history as the world's first transsexual mayor and then MP. She became the Mayor of Carterton in 1995, was re-elected resoundingly, won the Wairarapa seat as the Labour candidate in 1999, and then a second term in 2002. And, along the way, she showed that she had the brains, heart, energy and quick wit to easily foot it in that political world.

Things haven't gone her way, however, since she turned away from politics. For a start, she wasn't able to land the kind of job that her skill and experience fitted her for. And then ill-health, from kidney and heart disease, has taken a terrible toll on her more recently. Even so, she agreed to link up with Dale for this reflection on her past.

Georgina, tēnā koe. You've lived such a rich and colourful life — it's a great privilege for me to talk with you. But, first, let's hear about the days before you came to prominence in the political world.

Kia ora, Dale. Well, in the early years, I had difficulties socialising because of my transsexuality. That posed a few issues and barriers for me. But I'm pleased to say that, during my lifetime, I've been able to contribute to some of those hard attitudes being softened. And I've helped liberate the gay communities, the LGBTI Takatāpui communities, in our country.

It's been a bit of a crusade of mine to right the wrongs, and that's come to pass. So that's been wonderful in the political sense.

Other experiences have been in the entertainment world. Television, film and theatre — and as a drag diva for 11 years in Auckland during the 1980s. But a health problem has now brought just about everything to a

grinding halt while I address that issue.

Kia ora, Georgina. Can we talk now about your whānau?

Yes. Well, as much as I know of it. In the Māori context, I'm of Te Ātiawa, Ngāti Mutunga, Ngāti Raukawa and Ngāti Porou descent. My mum, Noelene, was from Taranaki. She was a Tamati, and my father was Jack Bertrand. He's the Ngāti Mutunga side. Those are my biological parents.

But my mother divorced Jack Bertrand and married Colin Beyer in the late 1950s, early '60s. Sometime around there. And, my mother, for whatever reason, decided to change my surname.

And her parents in Taranaki, Taka and Aileen Tamati, raised me until I was about five. So, that's sort of my beginnings. It's all there in my book, *A Change for the Better*. But with much more detail.

It's a remarkable story. What sort of boy were you, as George? How did you fit into school?

Oh, who cares? That person has now melted into me. It sort of smacks of the comment that Brian Tamaki made to me once. He says I murdered the man inside me. But that's not it at all. I really don't know what that person would've been, or was really like, because I always struggled with being in a foreign body.

I'm trying to picture what that was like for you in a Māori setting.

Well, I wasn't really raised as a Māori. In fact, I had very few experiences of Māoridom when I was a child. Very few and far between. Like attending tangi — but only rarely. You see, my mother was raised Pākehā-fied. Let's put it that way.

She was sent to a boarding school. One of eight children from a poor Māori farming family in Taranaki with sort of Pākehā aspirations to have their daughters better themselves and catch good husbands. You know. Things like that.

But it wasn't smooth-going. I'll give you an example. My father was a police constable, and they were invited to a function at Government House. That was all very posh in the 1950s, so Mum felt really proud, as a Māori woman, to be able to go somewhere like that.

Then they went to an after-match function at the Royal Oak Hotel where she wasn't permitted to enter the lounge bar upstairs. They didn't allow Māori in there. So that juxtaposition of experiences in the course of one night confirmed for her that being Māori was a definite minus.

These days we're more likely to accept that there are those who feel they're in the wrong bodies. But, when you were young, I suppose many people would've been confused by how you felt.

Well, for me, there seemed to be a mismatch. And I really started to struggle with it when I was around four or five years old. Adults put it down as a childhood behavioural thing. That it was just a phase — and that it would pass. The dressing up in women's clothing and things like that.

It was viewed as amusing by adults or caregivers around me. But, when I got a little bit older, and persisted with this kind of behaviour, they wanted to condition it out of me. There'd be a sharp word. Or a clip over the ear. Mild forms of punishment. And I soon worked out that to behave like that was a no-no.

Then there was other conditioning like sending me out with the uncles to go hunting, and making me do butch kinds of things.

But my behaviour never went away. I just got very good at disguising it, or hiding it. I don't know what that says about the psychology coming into play for kids who're still only eight or nine or 10 and have this inexplicable compulsion to be the opposite gender to what they've been physically born as. That's a lot for a young kid to try and cope with.

What about your mum's attitude towards this? Was she supportive?

Well, when I started my transitioning phase, I was 16, almost 17. I'd left Auckland, where my family were living at the time. I went to Wellington and I stayed out of touch for about 18 months. They didn't know where I was. I could've been anywhere. Even dead. I just disappeared. In that time, I was making my transition.

When I decided that it was time to let the family know what was happening, I did tell them. But, when I contacted my mother with my news, she had news for me. She wasn't at all well. She had cervical cancer, and didn't think she had long to live.

Her news was a shock for me, but she wasn't surprised by what I told her. I hadn't had a sex change by that time but I was on that path, and this was my coming-out to her. When I asked if I could come and see her, which I was able to do, she asked me to attend as her son — and, when she passed away, to attend her funeral as her son. And, if I didn't, it would affect the inheritance I was going to have from her. She put it in her will.

So that gives you an indication about her attitude at that time — although I think that, if she had lived and if she had watched my career, particularly in politics, she would've changed her attitude quite considerably. I'm sure of it.

Can I acknowledge your bravery at that time? Because it is brave to start accepting who you are and to stand up for who you are, when you're faced with so many challenges.

When I went up to see her, I did dress down. Deliberately. But I wasn't convincing. I had breasts and beautiful long hair, so it was hard to disguise all that. At her funeral, though, I dressed in a suit and tie.

This was the point where I thought: "Right, I've finished my obligations to her." And I left the service ahead of most of the others so that I could go home and change into Georgina. And, by the time everybody else arrived at the after-match, there I was.

The reaction from some of the family was: "Oh, how could you disrespect your mother like this?"

But I told them right then that it wasn't my problem any more. I said: "It's yours. Deal with it." And that was that. I wasn't going to be swayed by what they thought. Or whether they approved or disapproved, because we had just buried the only person whose opinion I cared about.

In this new life that you were embarking on as Georgina, were there others like you who you trusted?

No, it was very difficult to trust anyone in that sex industry environment. It can be a nasty place to be — with the drugs and the sub-culture lifestyle that goes with that. And that's especially so for a marginalised person, which I was as a transsexual and Māori.

I was living the street life. I don't mean sleeping in cardboard boxes or whatever, but I was out there selling my body just to get by. Institutional discrimination and prejudice and stuff wasn't unknown, so I couldn't get a benefit unless I agreed to be the man I was supposed to be.

But I drew a line in the sand and said: "Stuff you. This is who I am — and I'm not going to chuck on a pair of trousers five times a week just so I can have a job." When you do that, though, when you fight the system, you suffer the consequences.

So, the street life was where I made a buck. I'd rather not have had to do that to earn a crust, but it took a while to climb out of that work. Then, in my early 20s, some of us discovered that we could get a sickness benefit if we'd allow the doctors to say that we had a "psycho sexual disorder". So, most of us ended up getting a sickness benefit that way.

We thought: "Oh, well, if we're going to have a psycho sexual disorder, let's have one and get paid for it." I know that sounds cynical. Years later, when I was in parliament chairing the social services committee, I regaled the committee with that story one day when we were looking at benefit fraud.

I was giving them an example of how society can inadvertently force people to be a burden, when, in fact, they actually want to be productive and tax-paying. Where's the sense and logic in that? I should be able to do anything I set mind to doing, just like everybody else. While I'm paying taxes I expect to be treated equally.

Georgina, I'm pleased that you can see the lighter side of that, too. Because, you know, there must've been a whole lot of darker aspects to what you were forced to go through.

Oh, absolutely. Well, you know, I've had knives to my throat. There was so much violence in that world. And some of that is still around today. Homophobic and transphobic attacks. They were common in my day. And I know trans people who've suffered in the hands of police as well.

Moving on now to quite a different world. When you became the mayor of Carterton, it took a lot of New Zealand by surprise. Myself included.

Me, too, Dale.

When you were voted in, a whole lot of us felt: "Hey. Maybe we're growing up here in New Zealand." And it made international headlines. You were the mayor before you became an MP. But what happened to make you decide to put your name forward for public office?

Well, it started with me working part-time in a community centre in Carterton. It was in the aftermath of the 1991 budget. That was Ruth Richardson's "Mother of all Budgets" where she slashed about 25 percent off welfare benefits.

Then six months or so later, as they began to implement the budget and those cuts, there were ramifications around the regions, including places like Carterton. There was homelessness. Young kids on the streets. Graffiti. Hooliganism. Stuff like that.

At the community centre, we came up with a few ideas that we thought would help — including having a caravan, at the caravan park, which could provide temporary accommodation. But the district council's response was so cheapskate that, when the local body elections came around in 1992, I was encouraged to stand. A number of people said I was a good spokesperson and that I'd represented them well.

So I ran on a ticket with the retired vicar, and off we went, mainly to air the issues we thought deserved a hearing. We weren't desperate about being elected. We just wanted a platform. I missed out that time. But, when there was a by-election after one of the new councillors resigned, I got half of all of the votes. That put me on the council. So that was my first major achievement — winning an election for the first time.

Oh, great days. And then you went on to the mayoralty in 1995 and, four years later, you were the Labour MP for Wairarapa. Your credentials included being a fine orator, a principled person, and a spokesperson for the disadvantaged. But I wonder if, even so, there was some resentment from one or two of the more conservative MPs.

There were three or four crusty old MPs who thought it was wrong for me to be there. Like Geoff Braybrooke. In the 1980s, he'd stood with Norm Jones on the steps of Parliament House to gleefully receive the petition against the homosexual law reform. So, I had MPs like Geoff who'd been vehemently opposed to all that stuff, just like John Banks.

But there was John Banks, only a few years ago, voting in favour of marriage equality, when he would've been one of the greatest homophobes that ever came out of that parliament. If he could see the light and change his mind — that gives you hope. The same with Maurice Williamson giving one of the greatest pro-gay speeches we've ever seen in our parliament.

But as far as personal nastiness to me from other MPs ... well, if there was any, it was done behind my back. And what's done out of sight is out of mind. Generally, everybody was polite to me, and gave me a shot.

There may have been some justification for resentment because, when I arrived, I was a sort of media sensation — and anything I did, no matter how innocuous, was reported on. MPs see publicity as oxygen so some of them might've resented how easily I got coverage.

I can understand that. But now, as you look back on that political period, do you have any regrets?

Yes and no, and I realise that's a bit fence-sittery. I was pleased while I was there that I learned quickly enough to take advantage of the privilege I had of being in parliament, and having access to resources. It was wonderful being able to deliver on some major things for my electorate — and, individually, helping people out of their little binds with government departments like ACC or Inland Revenue.

All of that was good and, frankly, if my work had been more focused on being out in the electorate with the people, face-to-face, doing it every day, I would've been very happy in the job. But unfortunately at least half your time is spent in the parliament — and I wasn't into that sort of party culture.

I was more prone to disobedience and bucking against things when I disagreed. And the greatest of those for me was the foreshore and seabed legislation. I pinpoint that period as being the beginning of the end of my parliamentary career. It was the nail in the coffin for me, even though I didn't leave until a couple of years later, in 2007.

And another factor was that, when it was about my time to be upgraded to a ministerial role, that role never came. And it wasn't going to after 2005 — so what was the point in staying?

From the outside, it looked as if your successes in public life would've led on to more opportunities. But, disappointingly, that hasn't been your experience, has it?

I would've liked to have wound up my political life by doing another couple of terms on a local authority. I would've gone back to local government, which I thoroughly enjoyed. After leaving parliament — and having had about 15 years of publicly elected positions — it was reasonable to assume that the experience was transferable out into, as they say, the real world.

But it didn't fall like that for me. And I really can't pinpoint why. It was not for want of trying. So, yes. That was a wake-up call. Anyhow, I didn't get job offers — at least not at a level that I thought was appropriate. And it didn't have to be a high salary necessarily. But I ain't flipping burgers for minimum wage at my age, and at this time of life.

So there's been financial hardship. I had to dispose of my assets to avoid becoming a beneficiary. But after that money was exhausted, I had to go and sign up to the dole and register unemployed. That was in about 2010. And that was a profound experience. How much further can you fall off the pedestal? Yeah. A very shameful experience, sad to say.

Don't feel ashamed, Georgina. Although, I can understand why you say that.

People do say: "Oh, you shouldn't feel bad. That's what the benefit is there for. That's why we pay our taxes." And things like that. But a decent person does feel an element of shame, as well as gratitude, because how could you have got to the top, so to speak, and then come back down that far?

You've certainly had it tough. And it's tough again with your health problems. But I know you have an upbeat outlook.

Well, one of the things that give me hope is that much of Māori cultural life is thriving. So many of our people are engaged — and looking great on television. And another positive is that, although much of the country still doesn't have its head around the Treaty or the Treaty settlements, there is progress there.

Thank you for your kōrero. Thank you, too, for your contribution in public life. And we wish you well with your health challenges.

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You have done great things Georgina. I from Te Arawa am proud to acknowledge you . Ngs mihi nui

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#2 by Ruth Henare 1 month ago

all the best with your unique history

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#3 by Daniel 26 days ago

Thank you Georgina for sharing your experiences with us all. I have a great deal of admiration for your strength and tenacity to over come the difficulties which you have had to endure. May the good lord continue to bless and guide in your hours of need, for you are truly deserving of his blessings. Keep safe and well.

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

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