



Beyer, Georgina (b. 1957)

by Tina Gianoulis

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As the first open transgender person in New Zealand to be elected to the offices of mayor and Member of Parliament, Georgina Beyer has evinced courage, humor, and personal honesty.

Though a career in politics seemed an unlikely, if not impossible, choice for a Maori woman who began life as a farmboy and worked as a drag queen, stripper, and prostitute, Beyer's deep concern for both her queer community and for the working farmers she grew up with earned her the trust of her constituents and the votes to win elections.

However, prejudice runs deep, and, in spite of her accomplishments, Beyer continued to face homophobia and transphobia when she retired from Parliament. Denied her party's support on the national political scene and finding it difficult to obtain employment, Beyer is still a respected speaker on the human rights circuit.

Beyer was born George Bertrand in November 1957 in Wellington, New Zealand's capital city. Shortly after her birth, her father, Jack Bertrand, abandoned the family, and Beyer spent her early years living with her mother Noeline's parents in Taranaki, a traditionally Maori region on New Zealand's North Island.

George was four years old when she returned to Wellington to live with her mother and new stepfather, attorney Colin Beyer. She had already discovered the joys of dressing up in women's clothes, and, by the time she was thirteen, began to feel that her true identity was female. Though this longing was kept secret at first, it did find occasional expression, for example, when Beyer cut school to go to the movies dressed in girl's clothes.

Isolated and confused in her emerging gender identity, Beyer's epiphany came in her late teens when she attended her first drag show. Overjoyed to find she was not alone, she began to work in the gay nightclubs of Wellington, singing and dancing in drag.

Like many young queers with few employment options, she also began the dangerous work of prostitution. While discovering a new home in the gay community, Beyer was also aware of violent homophobia in the larger society.

In the late 1970s, she was beaten and gang-raped by four men, a crime she dared not even report, since her low self-esteem led her to believe that she deserved such treatment. This devastating experience became a positive turning point in her life as she ultimately grew to believe that no one should feel so worthless that they consented to abuse. This growing self-acceptance would lead Beyer to a life in public service.

In 1984, Beyer underwent sexual reassignment surgery, officially becoming the woman Georgina Beyer.



Georgina Beyer addressing the Asia/Pacific plenary session of the International Conference on LGBT Human Rights in Montreal in 2006. Photograph by Wikimedia Commons contributor Montrealais. Image appears under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.5 Generic license.

Having developed confidence and theatrical skills on the stages of the Wellington bars, she moved to Auckland, New Zealand's largest city and cultural center. There she began to work as a successful television and film actor and radio personality, obtaining roles in such popular New Zealand series as *Jewel Darl*, *Inside Straight*, and *Close to Home*, in which she played both a man and a woman.

During the late 1980s, Beyer decided on another career change. Tired of being typecast as a drag queen or a lady of the night, she determined to pursue a career that could help improve conditions for rural children such as she had been. She moved south again to the farming community of Carterton in the Wairarapa region to study to be a social worker.

Though Carterton was a conservative area, and though Beyer was always open about her gender identity, her sincerity and hard work soon made her a beloved member of the community. In an interview with *The Independent*, Beyer said, "Children would say to me, 'Are you that queer that's moved into town?' I would say 'Yes, I'm a transsexual. I used to be a man, but I'm a woman now.'"

In 1992, encouraged by colleagues and friends, Beyer ran for a seat on the Carterton District Council, losing by only fourteen votes. In 1993, she ran again and won, and in 1995, she was elected mayor of the town, the first openly transgender mayor in the world.

Beyer financed her mayoral campaign by returning to the stage, playing a transgender sheep shearer in a play in Auckland. She loved serving the community as mayor and was re-elected in 1998 with a 90 percent majority.

In 1999, the Labour party approached Beyer to run for the Wairarapa seat in Parliament. She agreed, though no one really believed that a left-wing Maori trans woman could possibly win in the traditionally conservative district.

However, her opponent's negative campaign strategy backfired, and Beyer won the seat, becoming the world's first openly transgender Member of Parliament. She reluctantly resigned her position as Mayor of Carterton in 2000 in order to focus on her national duties.

As a Member of Parliament, Beyer worked hard to represent both her rural constituents and the national and international queer community that looked to her for progressive reform. She remained as unapologetically open about her trans identity as ever, answering even questions about her sex life with frank humor, while speaking out about gay rights and working for the reform of prostitution laws.

As she told Australian journalist Steve Dow, "I get asked questions no other politician would ever have to answer . . . Regarding the surgery, you know. 'Did it hurt?', or, 'When you have sex now as a woman, is it different to how you had sex as a man?'" To the latter question, she responded, "Well, honey, obviously."

More seriously, she has eloquently described the profound relief she felt following sex reassignment surgery, seeing it as liberating her from the "soul-destroying" feeling of "being trapped in the wrong body."

Although she was unable to achieve the passage of a gender identity protection bill, she showed remarkable political savvy in persuading both the Solicitor General and the Attorney General to sign a statement making that protection explicit under New Zealand's current human rights bill, thereby achieving the same result.

Able to speak with the authority of one who had worked in the sex industry, she was a major force in the passage of the Prostitution Law Reform in 2003. She opened her speech in Parliament on the issue by declaring: "Madam Speaker, I shall take the liberty of assuming that I am the only member of this House

with first-hand knowledge of the sex industry." As journalist Kathy Marks notes laconically, "No one contradicted her."

She was also an effective proponent of the Civil Union Bill of 2004, which accorded same-sex couples the same rights and responsibilities of married heterosexual couples.

In 2007, exhausted by the long hours and demanding workload of a national representative, Beyer resigned from Parliament.

Though she had won the votes and hearts of many of her constituents, Beyer remained a political outsider, and the Labour party did not offer her the support that was often given to ex-MPs.

Beyer was not offered a job on any government commissions and was rejected for a seat on the Human Rights Commission. Discouraged and angry, she expressed regret at leaving local politics for the national arena.

A brief stint as coordinator of the community group Violence Free Wairarapa ended in 2008, and Beyer found herself looking for a job. In 2010, she was working as a sales clerk in a jewelry store when she decided to re-enter local politics by running for mayor of Masterton, the largest town in Wairarapa. Though she had considerable community support, her bid was cut short when her major donor died, leaving her short of funds to campaign.

Beyer's experiences as a groundbreaking politician, her public role as a transgender spokesperson, and her glamorous, theatrical persona make her an internationally popular speaker on issues of sexual and gender identity.

Beyer's life is the subject of an autobiography, *A Change for the Better* (2002), and of a documentary by Annie Goldson and Peter Wells, *Georgie Girl* (2003).

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About the Author

Tina Gianoulis is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.