Transcript of **Out of The Woofworks** Episode 13: “Gender Identity and Me”

RACHEL: Welcome back to Out Of The Woofworks, here with me, Rachel Forday, on a podcast where we’ll be talking about dogs, training, and more importantly human social issues, both in the dog industry and in the world.

Today, you just have me, and I want to talk about gender identity, from my personal experience. I know it’s August already but I think often about how I want to talk about these topics not just during their month. Like I want these discussions to continue outside of Pride Month or AAPI month, or Black History Month. I want us to keep talking about everything, whenever.

So that’s enough of me rambling, let’s get right into it!

[Intro Music]

RACHEL: In the first episode, I mentioned that my pronouns are she/ they and of course if you see me on any social media platform you’ll see my pronouns included there. It’s been a whole up and down figuring that out for myself to be honest.

So, let me start right at the start and almost give you quite a bit of my life story.

So when I was little, maybe about 5 years old or so, I decided that I didn’t want to wear dresses and skirts anymore. I only wanted to wear shorts or trousers. Thankfully my family was like, "cool whatever, guess this kid's a tomboy". You know, it wasn't a big deal, they let me wear what I want. Great. I also never had long hair, in fact the time my hair was ever actually long enough to be tied up was recently, during COVID, and I was afraid to go to a hairdresser's and get my hair cut. So I've also always had short hair as well.

As a kid, I never played with Barbie dolls or you know, just like dolls in general. My mum, as a trained engineer, was amazing and allowed me to play with what I wanted like Lego or building my own trucks and things like that. And of course, a lot a lot of animal related toys and plushies. Often relatives might assume because I'm assigned girl at birth

that I would like dolls and stuff like that and give them to me, but we ended up just kind of passing them along to other relatives really.

Sadly in Singapore, in Primary and Secondary school, we have uniforms and if you're a girl, you have to wear a skirt, if you're a boy you wear shorts or trousers depending on what year you're in. And that was quite uncomfortable for me. For PE, you know like sports lessons, everyone gets to wear shorts so that was the best. And I remember like after school and stuff, if I can just be in my shorts, I will be in my shorts. And I was still always that quote unquote "tomboy", but not like a sporty kind of tomboy. Just I don't know, it was like, my vibe or something.

During this time I also tried to give myself another name, Richie. And I would have it as part of my username for things, and stuff like that. And I did manage to get a few friends to call me that but it didn't really stick that much with other people. Of course, now I don't identify with that name anymore, but you know, that's some genderqueer/non-binary foreshadowing right there.

Along the way, especially when I was younger, older people may mistake me for a boy and I don’t know, I didn’t really want to be a boy necessarily but I also wasn’t a big fan of being called a girl. As is now, where I’m not a big fan of being lumped under “ladies” or “women”.

Thankfully after that, I went to a polytechnic to do my diploma in music and audio technology and that was a more vocational, cool kind of institution, so no uniforms or anything like that. I wore tshirts and jeans all the time.

After I graduated from that, at one point I worked in a conservation centre for art and historical artefacts. That's not an important part of the story. But basically I had a bus to and home from work, and on the bus one day, I was sitting next to a friend from work and reading the newspaper with them. And there was an article in the newspaper about gender neutral bathrooms. I can't remember specifically what the point of the article was now but the term "gender neutral" was mentioned and this was the first time I had ever heard that term.

Growing up in Singapore, it's very cis heteronormative. People are conditioned to want the "lifescript" where you get married, you get to buy a government flat, and have kids. I mean I've known my entire life I

never want kids so I never really wanted the "lifescript" but I also didn't know about a lot of things like gender identities either.

So I was really excited to learn about the term "gender neutral". I messaged one of my friends who said they have a genderqueer friend and that they can link me up with them to chat with so I can understand a little bit more. And I did that, and they really were the first that helped me to start thinking about this. I remember the first feeling I got is that I finally feel like I know who I am, like everything makes sense now. There was this a feeling of comfort with getting to understand this and knowing I'm not alone. But I didn't really talk to many people about it because I guess I was still trying to understand myself.

Then I came to Liverpool, in the UK, for my degree in sound engineering. And at the intake part, so you know the first day you enter the university and you fill out your details and all that, they had two questions that I was quite excited to see.

The first asked for our gender identity and the options were: Male, Female, Non-Binary and others. I can't remember the exact wording but it was something like that. And then the next question was about pronouns. So in my first year, the very first time encountering this, I selected Non-Binary and they/them pronouns. It was nice that they had asked and normalised it and this was so exciting for me considering that back home this would never be asked at all. But unfortunately it felt like none of the teachers, at least none of mine, followed it. And I was already struggling socially during this time so I never said anything about it.

So from then I just kind of left it. I stopped even thinking about it, I didn't really mention it at all. And I mean, I had this feeling of like, I also didn’t want to inconvenience people. And for the next two years when we had to fill this form again, we fill this at the start of every year for whatever reason, I actually just went back to saying Female and She/Her. And actually I partly also did that because in one of the years, as we were filling up this form, a guy in front of me made a joke about these questions, so I was feeling a bit nervous to answer it any other way.

And fast forward to the last few years when I officially moved here and brought dog Dave over to the UK, we were filling up the census form. Yes it took a census form to bring me back and yes again, it's a form. Somehow forms are tied into me figuring these things out. And so again

this was another time where I got options apart from male and female for gender identity so I think I put in demigirl at that time. I actually typed that in.

And at the moment I think it's easier for me to say I'm non-binary. I use she/they pronouns. And you see me model how I would like she/they pronouns used with me in my video and image descriptions on social media. Also, just in case I've gone too fast in this discussion, if you're wondering what non-binary means it's just being outside of the gender binary of male and female.

And that's roughly my journey, my story through understanding my own gender identity and I'm not here to say that this is the way it will be forever, that I've figured it all. I'm still learning about stuff and learning about myself so things may change, labels may change but I feel more accepting of who I am and that's important.

Something that I find hard sometimes is the fact that my partner is a cis man and the self-erasure or the kind of worrying about whether people see me as an imposter. And of course my partner, he accepts me the way I am and all. I mean you know, I showed up for our wedding in a suit. Pink blazer and trousers and a white tshirt inside. I wasn't about to suddenly start wearing dresses for our wedding and that was all cool with everyone.

But yeah I benefit of course from the safety of being straight and cis passing when my partner and I are out together. If I get any looks, it's probably more because I'm Asian probably.

But at the same time, it's that feeling of "Am I allowed to say I'm non-binary or queer?" "Do people think I'm quote unquote 'faking it'?". And of course we see a lot of queerphobic things like saying "Young people are just faking different gender identities for attention."

I'm very lucky to have many great friends that affirm me and who have told me that the journey I made through understanding it, you know finding out I'm non-binary and then eventually going back to the gender I was assigned to, and then coming back to it... is quite a common thing.

And the fact is that I will always remember that feeling when I discovered gender neutral and non-binary was a thing. That feeling of relief, like there's nothing wrong with me, I just didn't have to words to

understand my life and how I've always felt. That feeling of I'm not alone and that many people around me are like me. This is why this discussion so important and learning about gender identities and affirming your gender diverse friends is so important.

I still have those feelings of not wanting to inconvenience people by correcting them but I am trying to do that more so that I am affirming who I am to myself and not slipping back into that weird void I was previously in.

And for those of you listening who are just starting to learn about gender identity and perhaps you're slipping up from time to time on pronouns and gender inclusive language… keep practicing and be mindful. If it's they/them pronouns you struggle with, some ways I've found to be helpful is to use they/them pronouns when I don't know someone's gender. I don't guess even if I know their name or what they look like. I try to default to they/them at the first instance until I have more information.

I also write about dogs using they/them pronouns when I'm writing about them in a generic way as opposed to writing about a specific dog I know. So in a sentence that might sound like "If your dog is chewing furniture, they may just need more other outlets to exhibit their natural behaviour of chewing."

Practice saying "everybody" and "people" instead of "ladies". And allow yourself to be corrected and then try and be mindful on the next instance to say the right thing.

Something I've recently included onto my call booking form if people want to book a call with me is for people to include their pronouns so that I am aware of that before we start chatting on the phone or over Zoom.

You know, gender diversity has always existed throughout history and many cultures around the world have always had more than just the gender binary, and this includes prominent figures in history and spiritual figures as well. This gender binary was imposed on us during colonialism and so it's important to know that gender diversity is not a new thing and this is not a thing of "young people are making things up". It's really something we have to work towards decolonising. I'm always reminding people that in Singapore, our anti-gay laws were imposed on

us by colonial Britain. Homophobia and queerphobia were never part of our "Asian culture" and gender diversity and gender identities is not a new concept, and it's not a specifically Western concept.

Along with that, They/them pronouns are also something that have existed for years including for when people don't know the gender of the person they're speaking about.

It's a wonderful thing to dismantle the gender binary system. It actually frees us from the harmful restrictions on the basis of gender. It's interesting because I feel now that I know I am non-binary, I can wear what I want and look however I want because I know I am who I am. When I was younger, I refused anything pink because I imposed those restrictions thinking that pink or even colourful things are "feminine" and I didn't want to be seen as "feminine". But now I know I can still enjoy pink things and colourful things or quote unquote "feminine" things and still be non-binary. That's just a small part of what can be dismantled.

So that's a little bit of my story. I know this episode was a little different and a little more personal but I hope you enjoyed it. I will include some recommended reading in the shownotes for those of you who would really like to learn more. There's always something to learn and decolonise in our lives and it's ok to not know everything all at once, as long as we keep trying and keep listening to each other and keep being mindful of how our actions impact the people around us.

So thank you all so much for listening. As always, you can find resources and transcripts in our shownotes. If you can't the link to that in the description, you can find them on my website dogatheart.co.uk/podcasts. If you enjoyed the podcast and would like to support us and what we're doing, you can buy us a coffee at buymeacoffee.com/dogatheart or you can leave us a nice little review on Apple Podcasts which will help us reach more people! You can also get updates about future episodes on our Instagram @dog_atheart and connect with me. I'll see you in the next one!

[Outro Music]