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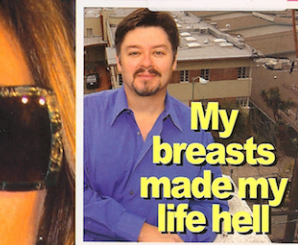
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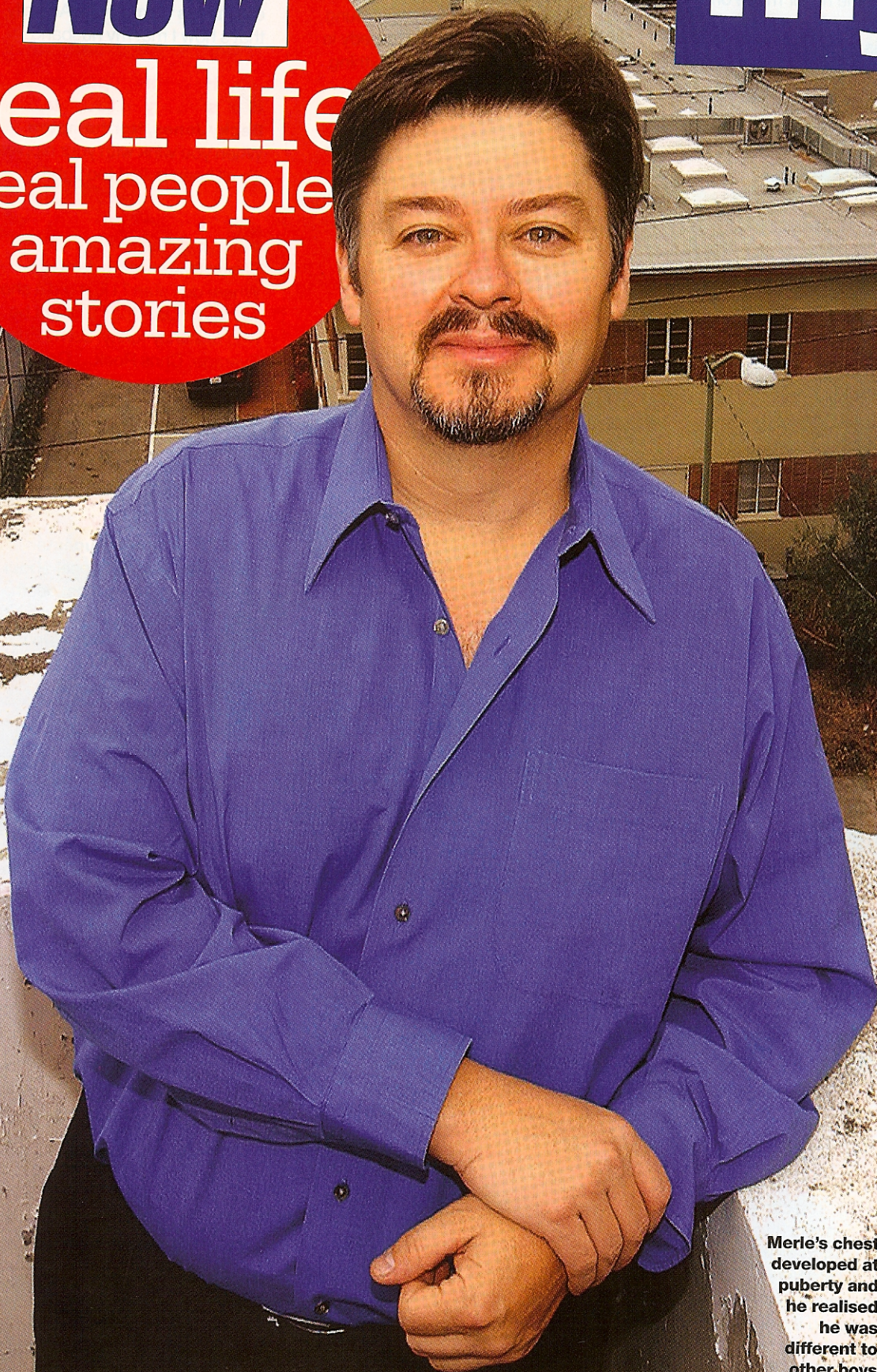
MARRIAGE CRISIS

**We'll divorce
says Brian**

My man breasts my life

Now

real life
real people
amazing
stories



Most guys like a nice pair of boobs – but not when they're their own. Merle Yost, 45, a California-based psychotherapist, explains what it's like to live with gynaecomastia

Imprinted on my memory is an incident that happened when I was six. I squeezed my chest into a bust to imitate one of my older brother's girlfriends and he said: 'Don't do that – you'll grow tits.' It's something that haunted me for years.

As a kid, I was a skinny little guy, but when puberty kicked in at 11 I noticed two large, hard lumps beneath my nipples. Within months, they'd grown into breasts. Emotionally, the changes taking place in my body were overwhelming. Other boys were going through changes too, but none of their chests looked like mine. All I could latch on to was the incident with my brother. For years, I believed that I'd caused my own misery by pretending to be a girl.

School became a torturous experience. I soon gained the nickname 'Tits' and the other boys thought it was funny to give me a 'titty twist'. The girls tormented me in a different way by offering to lend me their bras. Kids can be incredibly cruel and I was the perfect target.

Games lessons were a nightmare and I became hyper-conscious of my body. My parents took me to a doctor, but he just said the lumps were a normal part of growing up. I now realise he had no idea what he was talking about, but in those days doctors were gods.

Merle's chest developed at puberty and he realised he was different to other boys

made

hell

BEFORE



When I was 12, we moved to Tucson, Arizona, and I started a new school. In a way, it was a blessing – by that time I'd become expert at hiding my chest and as the school was in a Hispanic neighbourhood, I stood out for lots of reasons other than my chest. I was very isolated, but more or less left alone. I hurt my foot in an accident and had to give up games for four years, which was quite a relief.

But it also allowed me to completely disown my body. It was such a source of pain that I hated looking in the mirror and continued to avoid any situation – such as swimming – where I'd have to take off my shirt.

Once, when I was 17, I got a flat tyre while I was driving my choir director – an ex-Marine who was built like a side of beef – to a concert. He suggested I take my shirt off to change the tyre, but all I could do was freeze and say: 'No.'

What complicated the matter further was being gay – something I'd known from a very young age. Surrounded as I was by straight boys, I did wonder whether my breasts might make me more attractive. It was all so confusing.

By the time I went to college I'd become quite stocky and I decided to see if losing weight made any difference to my shape. I dieted and went for long runs and got down to just over 9st. But rather than improve matters, being skinny just made my breasts more obvious.

I'd taken to wearing Hawaiian shirts to detract attention from my chest, but decided it was time to go back to the doctor. When I took my shirt off to reveal my perky B-cup size breasts, I saw a look of complete shock cross his face. He actually had to leave the room to compose himself – but he had nothing useful to say.

Life became easier after I got into a serious relationship in my mid-twenties – one that lasted 19 years. My ex completely ignored my chest – he didn't want to upset me. But although that made it easy for me, it didn't help me accept my condition and therapy made me

In his thirties, Merle finally had surgery to flatten his boobs – and felt liberated

realise I had to confront the issue, or it would haunt me forever.

At 35, I finally made the big decision to have surgery. It wasn't very painful, but when the compression vest came off I was disappointed with the result. Liposuction had certainly made my chest flatter, but there was still some fatty breast tissue under my arms which left me a rather odd shape. And in a weird way, I missed my chest.

After a few months, though, I adjusted and experienced a dramatic personality change. I took off my shirt for the first time in 25 years without being self-conscious and felt really free.

Then, two years after the surgery, I set up a website for gynaecomastia sufferers. The response has been overwhelming. I'd spent all those years feeling like the only man in the world with breasts, but nothing could be further from the truth. The site averages 3,300 hits a day.

The level of shame around this subject is extreme – there are so many men out there suffering in silence. But some say their breasts give them erotic pleasure and that their wives enjoy them. Many guys bind their breasts, others wear bras. As for myself, I have no regrets now about having surgery. I've rid myself of the sense of shame I carried for so many years. ■

As told to Helen Renshaw

What causes gynaecomastia?

Gynaecomastia (spelled gynecomastia in the US) is a rarely-discussed overdevelopment of male breast tissue, which has nothing to do with obesity. The condition is common in adolescent boys – about 65 per cent experience gynaecomastia to some degree and the symptoms usually disappear as adolescence wanes. But 10 per cent are left with female-like breasts, burdening them with a social handicap that causes a deep and complex shame.

Occasionally, gynaecomastia can be a symptom of a condition such as male breast cancer or chronic liver disease. It can also be a side-effect of some prescription drugs and narcotics.

But in the vast majority of cases, doctors are unsure of the cause, although it's generally believed to result from an imbalance in the hormones oestrogen and testosterone.

Gynaecomastia can be emotionally devastating: feelings of shame, embarrassment and humiliation are common and for many men the best solution is surgery. Others, however, prefer to overcome the condition by learning to accept their breasts.

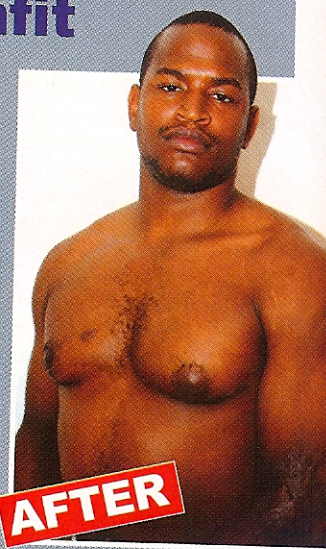
For more information, log on to www.gynecomastia.org

It's not just about being fat or unfit

BEFORE



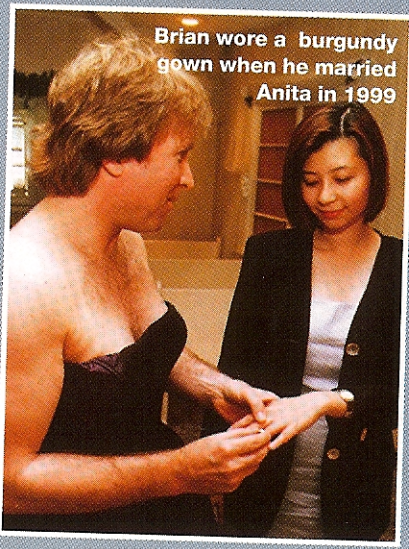
Tatum's operation to remove his breast tissue was shown on TV



AFTER

Gym instructor and father-of-two Tatum Johnson, 27, from London, was stunned when he developed large breasts in his early twenties. 'I'd seen breasts on fat men, but none my size,' he says. 'And no matter how much I exercised, they didn't go.'

Eventually Tatum – who, with Merle Yost, recently appeared in a Channel 4 documentary – underwent surgery. 'You don't have to live with this problem,' he says. 'You can do something about it.'



Brian wore a burgundy gown when he married Anita in 1999

Brian's a C-cup

Canadian Brian Zembic, left, doesn't have gynaecomastia – but he does have 38C breasts. The professional gambler won a £45,000 bet when he had breast implants in 1998 – and loved them. But when he met his wife Anita, he hid them from her. She was devastated when she found out. 'Everyone knew about Brian's breasts except me,' she said. Eventually she grew to accept them.

Photos: Jeff Rayner, Mirrorpix, Rex Features