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## OUT OF THE CLOSET FOR FIFTEEN YEARS AND MAKING IT IN HOUSTON, TEXAS

By Phyllis Randolph Frye, Attorney

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On the ninth of June, 1976, I was given my two-weeks notice and sent home by my boss. It seemed that as a guy, my hair was too long, my eyebrows were too thin, my conversation was too honest, and, "... the clients wouldn't be able to handle it." That marked the beginning of the end of my career as an engineer, and the beginning of the beginning of my transition to becoming who I truly was inside.

The two weeks notice ended on June twenty-third, my third wedding anniversary. Needless to say, my spouse and I were apprehensive about the future, but (if you like to read the last page of a novel first) I will tell you now that she and I have been out of the closet for fifteen years, and we are making it together in Houston.

Some background will help, although my story is probably very similar to yours. (One similarity is that neither of us drools, molests children, or fulfills the other stereotypes portrayed in books, on television, or by Jesse Helms.) My parents are still married. I am the middle child, with an older brother and a younger sister. I excelled in Cub Scouts and Boy Scouts (Eagle, Senior Patrol Leader, Order of the Arrow), although I would rather have worn a Brownie and a Girl Scout uniform. (Note: All Eagle Scouts, please write so we can form an association.) I remember those different feelings from before age five, and began cross-dressing often from age eight.

As a youth, I was a softball player, singer, swimmer, and hunter. In high school, I participated in the school newspaper, A Capella Choir, Senior Play, rifle team (two letters), and ROTC (Cadet Commander). Taking accelerated courses, I graduated with an A+ average, and went on to get four college scholarships at Texas A & M University. (Note: All Aggies please write so we can form a T-Aggies Chapter.) While at A & M, I did Singing Cadets and ROTC, got married, finished a Civil Engineering degree in three and a half years, stayed for a masters in Mechanical Engineering, sired a child, and was commissioned a Second Lieutenant in the US Army in 1970.



During my overseas military tour, my first wife didn't like me wearing her panties and opted for divorce and custody of our child. Needless to say, I'd done the purges and had tons of guilt. The military moved to discharge me. I promised to embarrass them if I didn't get an honorable discharge. Later, I even cut my wrist. This was August, 1973. I was a mess. (See, my story is close to your story.)

In September, 1973, I was born again to Christ. I remain a Christian of strong belief, but I am not writing to proselytize. Your religion is your business, mine is mine.

Also in September, 1973, I met the person who became my best friend, and has been my spouse for eighteen years. I told her about who I might become. We later fell into love. She decided to marry me with the comment, "If that is all there is wrong with you, I think I've got a bargain."

In June, 1976, I'd already lost some jobs by being honest about my cross-dressing. (I hate having to lie about things. One boss I told fired me while he was cheating on his wife with his married secretary.) Anyway, we decided that I would begin applying for work as a man, but that I would be upfront about my cross-dressing in private during the interview. Guess how far that approach went in the engineering community in 1976? After a bundle of I-want-to-hire-you-but's, my sweetheart told me that if they wouldn't take me openly for who I was privately, I should just become myself and carve out a niche. So, on September thirteenth, 1976, I became Phyllis full time, and haven't looked back.

First, I became aware of how badly society treats women. I began to hate the term "girl." I joined NOW shortly thereafter. Secondly, I became politically active with the gay and lesbian community (our natural allies), and with the Democratic Party.

Thirdly, I did not try to hide my past, nor did I try to hide what I was doing. (Of course, I did try to pass when out on the street.) We have lived in the same house continually, despite



her "shingle"

years of eggings, of spray paintings, burning soiled baby dialers on the lawn, and obscene phone calls (most frequently around christian [small c intended] holidays). I called universities and lectured everywhere. I openly defied the anti-crossdressing ordinance in Houston. I began to destroy it by not giving the cops or the bigots a stereotype-fulfilling reason to arrest me. In 1981 the ordinance was repealed. In 1991, the Mayor of Houston gave me a certificate of appreciation on the tenth anniversary of that repeal. (For more on the history of such ordinances, go to any law library and ask for 30 Hastings L J 1151.)

Fourthly, we tried to survive economically. My income had accounted for two-thirds of our income in 1976. We had



Being sworn in, May, 1981

a mortgage, child support, a car loan, and only one-third of the income we had been spending before. I learned how to sew. I did almost anything to get work, all to no avail. At Christmas, 1977, our Metropolitan Community Church brought us the canned food that was given the Sundays before. Yes, it got that bad. I fought the ruling of a bigoted administrative judge for over a year to finally get \$42 per week in unemployment benefits. I sold, and still sell Amway brand products. I used my GI Bill to go back to school to get a Masters of Business Administration and a law degree at University of Houston in 1981. My legal internship was a semester in the Office of the District Attorney. I learned a lot about the court room, while the DA's office learned a lot about myths and stereotypes.



With Olivia Labrie in San Antonio Court fighting (and winning) for change of records



*With co-stars of Houston talk show*



*With you-know-who*

Even though I was a licensed attorney in 1981, my ego was still very weak. I had gone through a lot of hell the last five years. I was making good money with my Amway business, and I had a few engineering clients because I had continued to pay to keep my engineering license current even during the lean years. That is what I did to earn money during those five years, along with a little law practice. But what I mostly did during 1981-1986 was fight the fights for individual liberties and for lesbian/gay/transgender rights. I also cussed (and still do cuss) Ronald Reagan a lot.

In 1986, my ego was stronger and I began to practice law as a trial lawyer. All of the political chits from the earlier years were now paid off: many of the judges knew me and respected me from their campaigns. Therefore, I got many appointments early in my practice, and the courthouse gossip about me was good from the beginning. I began to make good money, so we were able to pay off our mortgage. I even went to my twentieth high school reunion.

If you were to plot a graph of the joy in my life since 1986, you would see a continuing positive climb with only a few dips. Life is great. I remain a transgenderist (for want of a better label: I'm a full time and completely ready for surgery transsexual who stopped and may just hold here for the rest of her life). I am well known and am well respected in my work. The neighborhood has gotten over itself. We also bought a lake house last summer. I was elected last year by my peers as a director in my legal organization. I am also a director with the Houston League of Women Voters. And, I am a director of the Gulf Coast Transgender Community.

The point of all this is to say to you that 1991 is a lot better time to be out than 1976 was. And to say that if I could make it starting in 1976, you can make it starting now.

Sisters, take advantage of what I and others like me have done. Claim for yourself who you are, and to hell with the bigots. You have nothing to be ashamed of. Be proud of who you are. I'll end

with one last cliché, "You only have one life to live." Just one life, that's all. So, get on with being who you are.

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This article was reproduced from "THE TV-TS TAPESTRY JOURNAL", Issue 59 (Fall 1991) pp 65-67. "TAPESTRY" is the journal of the International Foundation for Gender Education (IFGE), Inc., P.O. Box 367, Wayland, MA 01778, AC617/899-2212 or 894-8340.

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