



A secret long held

Joel Borden became Joanne at age 84 — and she's now an advocate for the transgender community

BY ROBIN EILEEN BERNSTEIN
Special to Newsday

Joanne Borden kept her secret for nearly a lifetime. Born Joel Borden, Joanne lived most of her life as a man. As Joel, he never told his parents, his wife, his children or grandchildren about his true gender identity.

"I wanted to be a girl," Joanne said in a recent interview at her North Woodmere home. "It was a deep dark secret."

At age 78, she gathered the courage to walk around Manhattan for the first time as a woman. "I spent my life with a dream of being able to walk in the city, dressed as a woman, once before I die. Just once," said Joanne, now 89.

Five years ago, Joanne felt the time was right to come out to her grown children and to live as a woman without restrictions. Widowed at age 62 and retired from a career as an industrial engineer, Joanne said Joel no longer had to fear hurting his wife or losing his job by revealing his true gender identity. (Joanne prefers the male pronoun when referring to her life before her transition.)

A PRIVATE TRANSITION

Unlike Caitlyn Jenner, who very publicly transitioned from a former male Olympic decathlon winner to a sultry woman on the cover of *Vanity Fair* magazine at age 65, Joanne's initial change was much more private. But like Jenner, Joanne had struggled for decades with gender identity.

Shame and fear keep many transgender people from going

Joanne Borden, 89, of North Woodmere, a transgender woman, is one of Long Island's most fervent advocates for transgender rights. ■ Video, more photos at newsday.com/act2

See BORDEN on G28

Secrecy to advocacy

BORDEN from G27

public, according to David Kilmnick, chief executive of the LGBT Network based in Bay Shore. Because the U.S. Census doesn't ask for gender identity, data on the number of transgender people on Long Island is almost impossible to determine, he noted. The Williams Institute, a UCLA think tank that does gender identity research, estimates there are about 700,000 transgender people in the United States.

Of the 300 or so transgender men and women in the LGBT Network programs, 10 percent are 50 and older; all of them transgender women (people assigned male at birth who identify as female), Kilmnick said. Among younger members, there's a fairly even split. Years ago, gender identity was understood less, Kilmnick said, which could explain why "seniors are more closeted."

COVETED PAIR OF HEELS

Growing up in Brooklyn, Joel felt isolated. He would try on his mother's clothing and acquired women's garments, coveting a pair of heels because they were so hard to obtain. Joanne believes her parents suspected something was different about their son.

"I think that's why they loved my wife so dearly," Joanne said of Barbara, who married Joel when he was 28. Barbara broke Joel's pattern of dating women and disappearing when things got serious, Joanne said.

Throughout their 34-year marriage, Joel never shared his secret with his wife. "I was preserving our relationship," Joanne explained. And if Barbara suspected there was anything unusual about Joel, she never said so. "Why would she wake up the sleeping monster?" Joanne said. "I don't think she'd want to live with a woman."

Staying mum may have saved their marriage. "A lot of spouses really put a great effort into being supportive . . . but just can't deal" with the transgender issue, said Robert Balzarano, LGBT Network director of Care Services and a therapist. In his



Borden takes the podium at a June rally urging Nassau legislators to adopt laws giving equal rights to transgender individuals.

counseling of couples that include transgender women, "Most couples I've dealt with — it ends up in divorce," he said. The wives "are saying, 'I'm not a lesbian. I'm not attracted to women.'"

PROUD OF HER PAST

Joanne does not shy away from her life as Joel. She is proud of his accomplishments as a World War II veteran, patriarch and engineer. But by 2009, she knew she wanted to live as a woman, and finally gathered the courage to tell her children. "I'd been in

therapy for a year," Joanne said. "I started to weigh my options. Once I put my happiness in the equation, I decided I will come out." The decision weighed emotionally, she said.

"Every time I thought about it, I cried."

First, she drove to Massachusetts to tell her son, Peter Borden, now 56, and then to New Hampshire, where daughter Kathi Borden, now 59, lives.

Joanne's four grandchildren were told a year later. More than accepting, Joanne's family is proud of her. Recently, Kathi Bor-

den came to Mineola to support Joanne when she lobbied Nassau legislators on behalf of the transgender community.

Joanne's granddaughter, Nicole Borden White, 26, of Manhattan, attended New York City's Fresh Fruit Festival to hear Joanne's monologue reading, which won the 2012 Best Storyteller Award. "There were a lot of people that were thanking my grandfather for what she does," said White, referring to Joanne's efforts on behalf of transgender people. "They had a lot of stories to share with me about how Papa had helped them."

Peter Borden echoed that sentiment. "I'm incredibly proud of my father, Joanne," he said, citing her selflessness and courage, her fight for civil

rights and her commitment to making a difference.

Joanne fully embraces the woman she has become, but Joel is still an important part of her life. "I was a good man and I'm a good woman," she said. "I spent almost 80 years as a man — I can't deny that. And my children know that I'm a very good person and a very moral person."

Sometimes, Joel is the alter-ego Joanne calls upon for help. She chuckled giving this example: One day, her basement flooded, dousing the pilot light to the gas water heater. Joanne couldn't relight it, so she called a repair service but couldn't get anyone to fix it immediately. After weighing her options, "I said, 'Joel, go



Joel Borden, in a photo taken in 1944 when he was in the U.S. Army Air Corps

Long Island Transgender Support Groups

The Long Island Trans Experience (LITE) is a program run by the LGBT Network. It has support groups for transgender people and their families and friends. SAGE-LI (Services and Advocacy for GLBT Elders) offers a variety of programs and services geared to seniors (lgbtnetwork.org).

For more information:
Nassau 516-323-0011
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East End 631-899-4950

down and light the damn light,' and he went down and did it. Whenever I have a tough job, he does it. There's nothing he can't do."

'HAPPY THE WAY I AM'

Joanne was on hormone therapy for more than a year before coming out to her family, but has no plans for surgery. "I'm happy the way I am," she said. That's not unusual for someone who is transgender. Kilmnick stressed that making medical changes aren't necessary to be considered transgender. "There are many people who never transition fully," he said, citing the expense of surgery. "You don't even have to take hormones. Many never do anything." Yet they are still transgender.

Just as a gay person in the closet is still gay, a transgender person in the closet is still transgender. "You don't become it. You are it," Joanne said.

Once the decision to transition is made there are hurdles, such as changing one's name and gender on official documents such as a driver's license or passport. "It took a long time," said Joanne, who elected not to legally change her name. "I don't need a judge to tell me what my name is."

Dating after a gender transition can be a great challenge, Kilmnick said. "What many of the studies have shown is the transgender community is a third heterosexual, a third bisexual, and a third homosexual," he said. "Whom you're attracted to does not change based upon your gender identity."

A PASSION FOR WRITING

Romance, however, isn't on Joanne's agenda. Her passion is focused on her writing, which includes two books: "Transgender Complete: A Virtual Handbook" and "The Transgender Monologues: Gender, Sexuality, and LGBT Life." Both are available on Amazon Kindle.



Joanne Borden's family has been supportive and proud. Daughter Kathi Borden, of New Hampshire joined Joanne in Mineola as she lobbied Nassau legislators.

She's working on another book, "Identical Treatment in the Machine of the Law: The Quest for Transgender Civil Rights." It is a compilation of the 50 speeches she's given during the past five years urging the Nassau County Legislature to amend its civil rights law to include gender identity and gender expression. Suffolk County already bans gender-based discrimination.

"Joanne has been instrumental in Nassau County," said Juli Grey-Owens, founder of the Long Island Transgender Advocacy Coalition (LITAC) in Huntington Station. "She goes to every meeting every month and speaks out on this issue." And thanks to Joanne's persistent dialogue with the Nassau County Police Department, there is now a greater emphasis on transgender issues in its cultural sensitivity training for new recruits, said police spokesman Deputy Insp. Gary Shapiro.

Joanne thinks the media's spotlight on Caitlyn Jenner has raised awareness of transgender issues, adding her own goal isn't only tolerance, but understanding. Transgender people should be able to dress as they want, regardless of whether they fully pass as the gender they identify with, she said. "You can't be happy unless you are yourself."

It's precisely the way she feels now. "My mind is clear. I'm free."



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