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Who was Lou Sullivan?

by Liz Highleyman

Louis Graydon Sullivan was a pioneer of the transgender movement - not just as an organizer, but as perhaps the first female-to-male transsexual to identify publicly as a gay man.

Born in June 1951 and named Sheila Jean, Sullivan grew up in a working-class family in a suburb of Milwaukee. He was educated at Catholic schools and took a secretarial job at the University of Wisconsin after graduating from high school.

Though Sullivan later recalled that he had enjoyed "playing boys" as a child, his issues around gender and sexuality came to the fore when he was a teenager. "I look in the mirror and say to myself, 'That's you, Sheila. That girl over there is you.' It seems so funny," he wrote in his diary at age 14. Before long he started wearing men's-style white shirts and ties, eventually adding men's slacks, shoes, and hairstyle.

By the early 1970s, Sullivan self-identified as a "heterosexual female transvestite who was sexually attracted to gay men," and had embarked on a long-term relationship with an effeminate

man. Sullivan was active in the nascent gay liberation movement, which embraced gender-bending and favored the androgynous aesthetic of the broader counterculture. He was involved with Milwaukee's first gay rights group, the Gay People's Union, and helped produce its newsletter. Jumping into the controversy over drag within the women's movement, he wrote "A Transvestite Answers a Feminist" for *GPU News* in 1973, followed a year later by "Looking Towards Transvestite Liberation," which was widely reprinted in other gay and lesbian publications.

Over the next few years, Sullivan's gender identity shifted from transvestite to transsexual. In 1975, he and his boyfriend moved to San Francisco; as a parting gift, his supportive family gave him a good suit and an heirloom pocket watch engraved "Go West Young Man." But even amid the city's queer milieu, Sullivan had difficulty finding others like himself. "I want to look like what I am," he once wrote, "but don't know what someone like me looks like." Though still presenting as a woman in his job as a secretary for the Wilson Sporting Goods company, most of the rest of the time Sullivan fully cross-dressed and lived as a gay man, hanging out in gay bars and enjoying an adventurous sex life.

Sullivan sought sex-reassignment surgery in the late 1970s, but was repeatedly denied because he openly identified as gay at a time when people undergoing the procedure were expected to adopt stereotypical heterosexual opposite-sex gender roles. "They were invested in taking sissy gay boys and transforming them into straight women, and taking tomboy women who were socially unacceptable and changing them into straight men," according to fellow FTM Shadow Morton. Sullivan recalled that one gender clinic told him he could not possibly live as a gay man, since gay men were primarily interested in large penises.

Sullivan's frustration led him to campaign for the removal of homosexuality as a contraindication for



Past Out

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Lou Sullivan in a 1984 photo. Courtesy Lou Sullivan Society

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sex reassignment – an effort that finally succeeded in the late 1980s. At a time when most gender services focused on male-to-female transsexuals, he volunteered as the first FTM peer counselor with San Francisco's Janus Information Facility (a clearinghouse for information about transsexuality) and wrote the earliest informational booklet for transmen, *Information for the Female to Male Cross-Dresser and Transsexual* (1980). He later authored a biography of early 20th-century "passing woman" Jack Bee Garland. Sullivan was a co-founder of the Gay and Lesbian Historical Society of Northern California (now the GLBT Historical Society), helping to ensure that it was inclusive of transgender lives.

In 1979, after several refusals from established university-based gender clinics, Sullivan found sympathetic therapists and doctors and began taking testosterone. He had a double mastectomy and started a new technician job where co-workers had never known him as a woman. He finally underwent genital surgery in 1986, but experienced complications and never fully recovered; that same year, he was diagnosed as HIV-positive. "I took a certain pleasure," he wrote, "in informing the gender clinic that even though their program told me I could not live as a gay man, it looks like I'm going to die like one."

Sullivan devoted his final years to building the network of FTM contacts he had acquired over a decade into an organization, and eventually a visible movement. In 1986, he began holding peer-support get-togethers for people on the male transgender spectrum, which evolved into the present-day FTM International – today the largest and longest-running organization of its kind. Yet he continued to take the time to answer the many letters he received from transmen around the world, hoping to dispel the sense of isolation he had felt.

Sullivan died of an AIDS-related illness in March 1991, after making plans to ensure that the organization he created would continue. "Lou Sullivan left behind a mailing list of about 230 names, a roll of stamps, the model of inclusion in his support group, and the ethic of service to a community he hoped would someday exist," said de facto successor Jamison Green. "Now it almost does. In life and since his death, he has been an inspiration for many transmen, both gay and straight."

Liz Highleyman is a freelance writer and editor who has written widely on health, sexuality, and politics. She can be reached care of this publication or at PastOut@qsyndicate.com.

For further reading

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