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Kathy Anne Noble

Interviewed by Monika Kowalska

Monika Kowalska

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Monika: Today it is my pleasure and honour to interview Kathy Anne Noble, a transgender activist from Australia, the founder and president of Agender Australia, and Changeling Aspects, a Brisbane support group for transgender people located in Australia. The author of *Two Lives: A Transsexual's Story and the Fight for Recognition* (2011) now out of print. Hello Kathy!

Kathy: Hi Monika, good to catch up at last.

Monika: Could you say a few words about yourself?

Kathy: Oh dear, that is rather a problem, as I have done so much in my nearly 80 years. I was born in London, lived through the Blitz, married twice, to sisters, served two years National Service in the Royal Air Force. I spent most of my working life as a financial advisor both in the Uited Kingdom and Australia. I moved to Australia in 1980 and became a citizen in 1988. I have four kids from

my marriages still living, Seven grandkids and eight great-grandkids. They are spread across the world, in Australia, the United Kingdom and America. I finally transitioned in November 2001 on the Gold Coast, 45 minutes South of Brisbane. This year sees my thirteenth birthday as Kathy. Both of my wives are now deceased, and I miss them both.

Monika: You are the champion of a myriad of causes that touch on transgender rights. Could you name some of the initiatives that you took part in?

Kathy: I am still an activist and advocate for Trans* people and currently work with the Australian Human Rights Commission and the Queensland Anti-Discrimination Commission, as well as Government departments in the Queensland Government and the Commonwealth Government. After recent meetings with the Human Rights Commissioner and the Commonwealth Attorney-General's Director of Policy, they both expressed the view that a National Trans* group is sorely needed in Australia. We are currently working on this. I have been on the Board of Queensland Healthy Communities, and Open Doors, a group for the young, questioning their gender/sexuality. I have recently stood down from the L.G.B.T.I. Legal Service in Queensland. I feel that two years on any committee is enough, and believe that others can give new emphasis to problems. I am still working with younger Trans* people and helping them to understand what is required to amend documentation.

Monika: Why did you decide to write your autobiography *Two Lives: A Transsexual's Story and the Fight for Recognition*?

Kathy: I wanted to not only get my story out, but also the many problems that we face in our everyday lives as Trans* people. Acceptance, law, family, friends, school, drugs and hormones, as well as surgery, if one is able to afford it. I wanted, and still want, more understanding from governments and society at large. The fact that we are not monsters, but human beings who suffered a quirk of nature at birth.

Monika: Which aspects of your experience can be useful for other transwomen?

Kathy: That is a hard question, as I see each situation as individual. I try to help, based on my experiences as a Trans* person and of course the way in which we are expected to understand all that is required of us, in order to become our true selves. What annoys me is the fact that we have to prove that we know who we are to others. This is still lost on many. We must accept the fact that very few of us are going to become fully-fledged women, as we have not had the training given by our Mothers and Sisters, so have to have a crash course in order to achieve as much femininity as possible. I am thankful that much of this disadvantage will disappear, now that younger Trans* people have access to puberty blockers, and all that that will mean.

Monika: At what age did you transition into a woman yourself? Was it a difficult process? Did you have any support from your family or friends?

Kathy: I knew from about the age of six that there was something wrong. I compensated over the years by cross-dressing, but stopped after my second marriage, and wore a beard for twenty years. I finally came out to my second wife at the age of 65, just before we retired. She partially accepted my change and proceeded to tell the kids. They all accepted me, as did the grandkids. My wife died in 2000. For the boys it was a little harder, but they came good too, over time. I have been extremely lucky in keeping friends and work mates, but more important has been the fact that I have made many new friends within and outside of the Trans* community.

Monika: At that time of your transition, did you have any transgender role models that you followed?

Kathy: I knew of Christine Jorgensen and Roberta Cowell. It was later that I became aware of Cocinelle and Bambi, the French transsexuals. Cocinelle's book was my bible, until I lost it in moving house. I can't honestly say that I had any Trans* role models as such. I did my own thing and waited for many years before fully expressing my true feelings. One of my daughters said, "You did a bloody good job of hiding it all that time".

Monika: What was the hardest thing about your coming out?

Kathy: Telling my second wife. She told the kids. Her death was a terrible blow, which I still remember. It sounds dreadful to say, that her demise freed me up to become Kathy fully by gender affirmation surgery. I had what can only be described as a dream run throughout the transition period and, very importantly, after it. I had neighbors and friends support me, as well as very dear friends in both the Trans* and cross-dressing community who helped me through the full transition and what came afterwards.

Monika: You are a walking encyclopedia on the history of the transgender movement in Australia. Which events or persons have contributed most to the Australian transgender cause?

Kathy: There are many, both past and present. I think to name any of them would be to do an injustice to those that are not named. That might sound like a 'cop out' but I feel it is wrong to nominate people. There are those who have been around for many, many years, and then there are those who have been there recently and in between. I am privileged to say that I work with many now, and can draw on the experience of those older (Trans* time) ones. I am only sorry, that many have not recorded their life experiences, so others can read and understand the enormous differences that were faced 40, or 50 years ago, as to now. We have lost much of the history of the Trans* community.

Monika: What do you think about the present situation of transgender women in the Australian society?

Kathy: Good, bad and indifferent. We have a long way to go before transwomen are fully accepted in society. Many are afraid to declare themselves as transwomen, and the thought of going into hospital or having a mammogram scares them, as it means 'outing themselves'. If, as many do, they choose not to have surgery, or cannot afford it, this means that they cannot amend their birth certificates, except in the Australian Capital Territory, since March 2014, although they can legally amend their passports.

Monika: Could transgenderism be the new frontier for human rights?

Kathy: I like to think that it is already there, and just needs some extra push to make it into the limelight. The problem is that not enough of us are willing to stand up and be counted. Until true numbers are known as to how many Trans* people there are in the world, or any given country, we are not going to be fully recognised.

Monika: A few months ago Jared Leto received his Oscar for Best Supporting Actor for his role in Dallas Buyers Club as transgender Rayon. What do you think about transgender stories or characters which have been featured in films, newspapers or books so far?

Kathy: I have not seen that film. I have recently watched the televised feature *Carlotta* on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, and thought it was well done, but they had a female playing a Trans* woman. Many are portrayed in the media in a bad light. Wrong pronouns, names and being savaged on many occasions. Most books are by Trans* people and their life stories. Some books that feature Trans*, *Two Spirit People* and cross-dressers portray the characters in good, bad, and abysmal ways. Films usually use us as a fun element. There are of course some that really hit the spot, and others that are purely Trans* orientated.

Monika: The transgender cause is usually manifested together with the other L.G.B.T. communities. Being the last letter in this abbreviation, is the transgender community able to promote its own cause within the L.G.B.T. group?

Kathy: I think this was outlined to me by the Human Rights Commissioner, and the Director of Policy. They feel that we need to stand alone here in Australia, in order to be able to put our case to Parliament. Many believe that we should stand alone, as we appear to be dominated by the Lesbian and Gay section of that acronym. I have many friends in both, but would dearly like to see a National Trans* group. This is because our problems are so much bigger and misunderstood by many in the Lesbian and Gay community. It will be difficult, as we are so fractured as a Trans* community, and I wonder if we will ever be able to set one up, and be able to promote our cause and problems to Canberra.

Monika: Is there anyone in the Australian transgender society whose actions could be compared to what Harvey Milk was doing in the U.S.A. in the 60s and 70s for gay activism?

Kathy: I honestly cannot think of anyone who comes close to him, sorry to say.

Monika: Are you active in politics? Do you participate in any lobbying campaigns? Do you think transgender women can make a difference in politics?

Kathy: I am not directly involved in politics in the sense of standing for Parliament. I have done, and continue to, lobby via meetings as I have recorded above, and also by writing papers and submissions on problems that we face. We are not fortunate here in Australia, as we did not have a Georgina Beyer, as New Zealand did, as their, and the world's, first Trans* Member of Parliament. We have support from Parliament here via the Parliamentary Friends of L.G.B.T.I. Australians. I am still waiting to see what they achieve for Trans* people in general.

Monika: Could you tell me about the importance of love in your life?

Kathy: This has always been of great importance to me, as evidenced by my two marriages. It sounds strange, but I loved both wives and I still love the kids in my life. I miss that part of my life now, but I chose the life I lead now, as a single person. I had a dog for many years, but lost her some time ago. Love is outside of the family circle, and can take many forms. We can choose to interact with others in a meaningful way that shows our love for our fellow travellers. I hope that I have achieved this in some small way.

Monika: Are you working on any new projects now?

Kathy: I am always working on something. Currently I am trying to ascertain how the new ruling in the United Kingdom concerning Trans* people who stay married after surgery, which came into effect on 10 December 2014, has benefited them. They will be allowed to amend their birth certificates if they remain married. I am trying to find out how this could affect those in the same situation in Australia and New Zealand. There is also the move to organise a National Trans* group, and my ongoing work with governments and legislation. The work with the Trans* young and trying to get professionals and society to understand us more.

Monika: What would you recommend to all transgender girls struggling with gender dysphoria?

Kathy: Don't rush into this as, once done, it cannot be easily undone. All Trans* people need a thick skin and a very big sense of humour. Lastly, don't take yourself, and life in general, too seriously, be proud of who you are. There are not too many people who can lay claim to having lived successfully as both sexes. Love to all.

Monika: Kathy, thank you for the interview!

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