



## Susan Stanton's lonely transformation

**A year after Steve Stanton became Susan, the physical and emotional changes are surprising sources of wonder and pain.**

By LANE DeGREGORY, Times Staff Writer

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SARASOTA -- Every morning, Susan Stanton wakes early and takes three pills. They help her suppress who she was and become the person she believes she should be.

At 9 a.m., still in her pajamas, she climbs the stairs in her Sarasota bungalow, clicks on her computer and goes to work. Looking for a job.

"I miss the 16-hour days, working with so many bright people, leading the city. I still love Largo," she says.

"I think I'm suffering from 'Pretty girl syndrome': People assume I'm making tons of money, traveling around speaking. But the truth is: I need help. I'm starting to approach people I know in the area, which I never thought I'd be doing.

"Maybe that's the last part of the transition: Losing my male ego."

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This time last year, Susan was Steve Stanton, husband and father, a 48-year-old conservative man who oversaw 1,000 employees as Largo city manager. He had led the town of 76,000 for 14 years. City commissioners had consistently given him raises and rave reviews.

This time last year, Steve was making plans to tell city leaders that he had always wanted to be a woman.

The truth came out when a *St. Petersburg Times* reporter heard a rumor and asked if it was true. Steve said yes. A month later, on March 23, commissioners fired him.

So after years of fear and secrecy, Steve became his second self. Susan testified before Congress, appeared on TV with Larry King and Montel Williams and became the somewhat reluctant face of the transgender-equality movement. A CNN documentary crew followed her and still does.

Nine months later, she finds herself waking up alone in a new city, her year's severance pay running out, with no friends -- except the woman who does her electrolysis.

"I was totally unprepared for the reaction and rejection of almost everyone who'd been close to me," Susan says. "People I'd known for 20 years won't even talk to me."

Recently, over a long lunch in Sarasota, Susan opened up about surgery, family, dating -- and her greatest fear.

And for the first time since Susan appeared in public, her wife Donna and 14-year-old son Travis talked in a separate interview about what it has been like to watch their husband and dad turn into a woman.

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The physical transformation is nearly complete.

Susan's ash blond hair has grown into shoulder-length layers. She has thrown out the wig, learned to blow dry with a round brush. Her makeup is subtle. With estrogen, her breasts have swollen to size 38B. Last month, she had her first mammogram.

Electrolysis is almost over -- "Thank God!" Susan says. With the face and chest finished, there's only one place left undone. Susan says, "Transsexuals refer to it as Area 51."

The woman who performs the electrolysis has become Susan's confidant. She takes Susan shopping, shows her how to match outfits, answers questions like: When you go to the bathroom in a skirt, do you slide it down or hike it up?

"I'm still getting used to so many things about my new body," Susan says. "It's intoxicatingly enjoyable and absolutely right." She loves the feel of soft sweaters on her hairless arms, the new curves of her hips, her smooth cheeks and chin. And there's still one leap to make.

In May, Susan flies to Arizona for the \$15,000 gender-reassignment surgery.

She asked her wife to be with her, but Donna says that would be too painful. "I'm still having problems having dinner with this woman who used to be my husband," she says.

"I can't be there when the last bit of the man I married is taken away."

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Susan's wife still calls her Steve.

"It's hard for me to call my husband Susan," Donna says.

They've lived apart since early summer, but haven't gotten divorced. Every week they go out to dinner or hang out at the house they used to share in Largo. On Christmas Eve, Susan, Donna and Travis went to church together in Sarasota.

"Susan would like to be my girlfriend. But I'm really not ready for that," Donna says. "I wish Susan had her own girlfriends.

"I think, eventually, Steve and I will be better friends than he and I ever were spouses," Donna says, slipping back into familiar names and pronouns. "But that's going to take some time."

Donna, who had been a stay-at-home mom since Travis was born, is working part-time, as a medical technician.

"Two years ago, when Steve first told me he was going to make this change, I was angry," Donna says. "But now I don't feel anger. I feel like being a transsexual is a disability. And it's hard to be angry with someone because they're disabled."

In some ways, Donna says, her husband's journey actually has improved family relationships.

Finally, she could be honest with people. "I was so on-guard all the time, being his secret-keeper," Donna says.

The person she had worried most about -- her teenage son, Travis -- well, he shocked her.

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Susan's son still calls her Dad.

In the past 10 months, Travis says, he has spent more time than ever with his father. They get together every other weekend, and at least one weeknight.

They fish and scuba dive. Susan takes Travis to concerts and plays; she even comes to Travis' middle school to talk to his teachers and pick up his friends.

"Most of them are okay with it. They haven't been mean. I haven't been sad," says Travis.

"Everyone thinks my dad has hurt me and my life is ruined. But that's not how it is at all. I just think I get things more now.

"Like, I used to think gay people were kind of weird. Now I see how they feel," Travis says.

Travis misses having his dad around to help with homework; he misses watching Animal Planet with him before bed.

But he spends more time with Susan, he says, than he ever did with Steve.

"We do stuff together all the time. It's like being with my aunt or something," Travis says.

"Only he's still my dad."

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Susan wishes her mom were still alive, so she could meet her new daughter. Her mom was always asking what was wrong -- and Steve never told her.

Susan's sister, who met her for the first time this summer, exclaimed, "You look just like mom!" Her brother wants to help Susan book speaking engagements.

Her dad, who lives in Florida's Panhandle, doesn't want to meet Susan. "He still calls me Steve," Susan says. "We talk about the weather, his golf game, how his car is running. He doesn't ask about me.

"I guess I'll never see him again."

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Susan has met hundreds of other people like her. She was among the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people lobbying for a law that would make it illegal for others to discriminate against them.

But Susan has said all along that she's not like other transgender people. She feels uncomfortable even looking at some, "like I'm seeing a bunch of men in dresses."

Eventually, she decided it was too early for transgender people to be federally protected. People need more time, more education, she says. "The transgender groups boo me, now, when I speak. Isn't that ironic?"

"But I don't blame the human rights groups from separating the transgender people from the protected groups. Most Americans aren't ready for us yet," Susan says. Transgender people need to be able to prove they're still viable workers -- especially in the mainstream.

"The biggest issue against the federal legislation is that politicians think the ladies' rooms will be invaded by guys in drag," Susan says, "instead of someone like me."

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Loneliness consumes her. Even when she gets up the courage to go out, she is almost always alone: in the theater, in church and at women's group meetings.

A few times she has taken herself out to hear bands. Men have asked her to dance, she says, but she hasn't "been brave enough to accept." Part of her wants to.

"Six months ago, I would have said, 'No. Never. I'm not gay.' Now it feels nice, natural, when a man buys me a drink," Susan says. "It's nice to have someone order dinner for you, choose the wine."

The only guy Susan has gone out to dinner with, she says, is a gay CNN producer filming a documentary about her. "He knows how to treat a lady," Susan says.

She says she doesn't want to get divorced, but understands why Donna does.

The other day, she told her son, "Mom needs a man in her life now. And I may need the same thing."

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First, she needs a job. She has applied for more than 100 positions in city management, but has interviewed in only four cities -- Sarasota, Naples, Tempe, Ariz., and Berkeley, Calif.

Though she's officially Susan, Steve still has to surface every time Susan needs a reference. Without Steve, she doesn't have a resume.

"I'd rather die than go back to being Steve," Susan says. But she says losing her professional standing "hurts in ways I never could have imagined."

Steve spent most of his life hiding who he believes he really is, building a successful career. Susan has no professional reputation. Just people's biases and fears.

Most of the leads she gets from Monster.com have been for jobs as a secretary, administrative assistant or receptionist. Does being a woman mean she has to start over, do something with less responsibility?

"I was a good city manager. I know I was. I had high expectations and held people responsible for achieving results," Susan says. "I could've made it work. I'm not some drag queen in a pink miniskirt with 6-inch heels. And I'm not Aunt Bee.

"I don't expect to be making \$200,000 at my next job. I just want the opportunity to show I can still do what I've spent my professional life doing."

Ask her if she's happier now and she says, "That's an unfair question."

Her body finally matches her mind, she says. But she believes she cannot be complete without meaningful work.

"If I have no more professional existence," Susan says, "I will end it. I couldn't live like that."

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Around noon each day, she pads downstairs into her bedroom and swaps her pajamas for running clothes. Susan wears a jogging bra now. But she still wears Steve's shoes.

She used to run 2 miles at lunch. Now, she can barely make it through a half-mile. The change in her strength and stamina, she says, has been profound.

After her run, Susan comes home to shower. It used to take Steve three hours to become Susan. Now, Susan can get ready in 40 minutes, including accessorizing.

She stands in front of the mirror, checking the jewelry she borrowed from her wife. She's satisfied with her image, if not with her life.

"I've never been a man. What man would want to cut off his balls?" Susan asks. "And I wasn't born a woman, so I can never be a real one.

"I just want to be authentic, to be who I really am ...

"Whoever that is."

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**Susan Stanton's only son, Travis, is 14. This fall, his middle school teacher asked the class to write about tolerance. With his parents' permission, and Travis' consent, here is the essay he wrote, edited for spelling and space.**

Throughout my whole life, I thought my dad was a really tough guy. He went out with the cops and busted bad guys. He shot guns, fought fires. He was an aggressive driver. He liked football and lots of sports.

Then one day my thoughts changed about him when we had a family meeting and he told me how he felt about himself. He said he felt like a woman on the inside and was going to change into one. He said he tried his best to be a manly guy, but he couldn't stop his feelings to become a girl.

At first, I thought I was in a dream. I thought he was 100 percent manly man, more manly than most guys.

After a few days, I thought about it. I knew he was making the right choice to become a girl. Although I can't relate to his feelings, it must be really hard to hide something like that. It would be like having \$1-million and not being able to spend it. After just so long, your feelings would take over and you would spend it. ...

I think that everyone should be who they are and not try to be the same as other people. If you ask me, this has got to be the most manliest thing he has done in his whole life. It takes a real man to come out of his shell and say, "Hey, I am who I am."

Now he is who he is meant to be. He is himself.