

Transgender Attorneys

Freedom to Be Me: Transgender Attorneys in the Legal Workplace

For clarity purposes, subjects are referred to using pronouns reflecting the genders they were born as when referring to events that took place before they made their choices to change their physical genders. Otherwise, they are referred to using pronouns reflecting their current genders.

The World Professional Association for Transgender Health defines gender dysphoria as "a condition in which one's identification and desire to live as a member of the other sex is deep-seated, unavoidable, and overwhelming." For Phyllis Randolph Frye, Shannon Minter, Mia Yamamoto, and Joann Prinzivalli, these words couldn't ring more truly.

All four of these well-respected, successful attorneys were born the wrong gender. In other words, at very young ages, all of them realized that their psychological identities didn't match up with their physical identities. Upon this realization, each has dealt with his or her gender dysphoria in varying ways, and all have gone on to live happy and fulfilling lives.

There are some of the best-known voices in today's transgender community, boldly demanding acceptance and equality for all; and their stories, though spotted with struggle and pain, are stories of inspiration and freedom that serve to illustrate how the legal profession is leaving its traditionally stuffy demeanor behind and evolving into a profession where all are welcome.

Phyllis Randolph Frye

Phyllis Randolph Frye, a transgender lesbian attorney in Houston, TX, has been through her share of battles, but the easy, nonchalant way in which she looks at life shows that they've only served to make her stronger.

Five feet and 10 inches of outspoken, voluptuous woman, Frye is more than a little intimidating...and not just because she used to be a man. Frye is one of those people who just seem to know who they are and what they were made for—one of those people who make you want to scramble hastily toward your dreams in a slapdash attempt to catch up with them.

Frye, born Phillip, grew up as a young man, complete with Eagle Scout badges and a buzz cut. However, Frye knew as early as six years old that he was different from other boys, that his mind was telling him he was a girl. While this realization is never an easy one to explain to others in your life, it was particularly hard for a young man raised in San Antonio, TX, during the 1950s to talk about.

Throughout the next 28 years of his life, Frye played the part of a man the best way he knew how, going on to join the Army, get married, and have a son. Behind closed doors, though, Frye found himself cross-dressing, a habit that eventually led to the demise of his marriage, his discharge from the army, and his attempted suicide.

However, strange as it may sound, it was his attempted suicide that ended up leading him to realize that he wanted to live. In 1972, Frye met and fell in love with a woman who was confident enough in herself and so completely in love with the person Frye was that she didn't even mind his cross-dressing; she told Frye that with all the things wrong with men of the time, she felt pretty lucky.

During their time of wedded bliss, Frye finally began making his permanent transition into Phyllis, and that's when his professional troubles began. Fired from his job at S&B Engineers when news of his transition became common knowledge, Frye embarked on what turned out to be a long period of unemployment, during which his wife supported the two of them. After Frye was denied job after job after job, both Frye and his wife agreed it was best for him to start the voice lessons and electrolysis that would help transform Phillip into Phyllis.