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"I have come to see that my true desire, however, is to become a warrior of the heart," she writes in a short bio.

Though employed as a systems analyst, Buckwalter's primary interest is music, and she has belted out her own renditions of material by Bonnie Raitt, Linda Ronstadt, Bette Midler and Barbra Streisand.

eventually moved to Portland.

Buckwalter says it was only after Contreras moved here that she was able to verbalize a deep-seated desire to fully live as a woman vis-à-vis gender reassignment.

"I felt being honest was paramount. I didn't want to hide anymore," Buckwalter says.

"I was always taught to look at the person for



Upon her arrival in the Rose City, Buckwalter began singing at the Embers, along with an array of other performers, female impersonators first and foremost.

"But for me personally this was not a persona I wanted to wear just while performing. Being female was not something I could just take on and off," says Buckwalter, who was divorced in 1993.

In early 1995, she and Contreras, who was living in California, began writing each other by e-mail at the urging of a work associate. They corresponded for a few months, but did not meet face to face.

"I was under the impression that I was talking with a man," says Contreras, 39, who identifies as bisexual. "But it was really the person inside I was communicating with. Lorin was so gentle and tender and got me to open up. Lorin talked about his children with a passion and seemed so different."

The two then began talking on the telephone. Finally, after several weeks, they met when Buckwalter journeyed to the Golden State for a work-related convention.

"Lorin had told me that she preferred to be a woman," says Contreras, adding, "I have to admit I was a little relieved because I wasn't looking to get into a relationship with a man."

The couple fell in love, and Contreras, an avid potter with an interest in Native American culture,

who they are," says Contreras, "to not judge people by what they are. To me, Lori is Lori, a warm, generous and caring human being whom I love with all my heart. Lori is not a label."

She adds, "My only question to Lori was, 'Are you sure?'"

The answer is, obviously, yes.

According to attorney JoAnna McNamara, once Buckwalter undergoes gender-reassignment surgery as well as a legal change of sex, she and Contreras will indeed be two legal females who are legally married to each other.

"The state will have no standing to revoke their marriage because at the time it was entered into, the couple met all the legal criteria for marriage," she says.

In October, the team of McNamara and Buckwalter got the Oregon Bureau of Labor and Industries to reverse years of policy and immediately begin accepting complaints from transsexuals who claim discrimination because of their status as transsexuals.

Though the argument was controversial, McNamara persuaded BOLI that transsexualism must be considered a protected disability under Oregon law.

"I got into law because I enjoy helping people," says McNamara, 46, a 1996 law school graduate who previously worked as an aerospace technology engineer. She has represented Buckwalter pro bono the whole way.

"I'm doing this because I have strong feelings about it, and many times transsexuals simply don't have a lot of money," she says. "They may lose their jobs when they begin to transition.... It can be very, very hard for them."

If insurance companies don't cover the costs,



and many don't, gender-reassignment surgery can be pretty pricey for many people.

Money remains a stumbling block for Buckwalter, who estimates it will cost \$11,000 for her surgery.

"I would sell my soul to pay for this," says Buckwalter, who admits feeling guilty about the expense. "I punish myself with the guilt about the money. I think I should be using it to send my kids to college, but I know I must first resolve this issue.... I asked my kids if they understand that this is the equivalent to them finding their way in the world. I think they do."

Buckwalter hopes to undergo surgery in February.

"To come to Portland and find myself going down Division and looking up at OHSU, well, it's like being camped outside the Emerald City," she says.

"I've come all this way and I'm stuck outside—but it's not a heart or a brain I'm searching for," she adds with laugh.

Her time, however, may finally have come.

