

CROSS PURPOSES

Trans Evangelist Paula Nielsen credits religion for her survival during Portland's conservative past by Katy Davidson

On a recent Tuesday morning, I sat across from Sister Paula Nielsen, nationally recognized Trans Evangelist, at a Lyon's restaurant in Portland and ate pancakes while some four-eyed, grubby-handed grade schooler burned stare marks into the sides of our heads.

"If someone in public doesn't like the way I dress, they can kiss my ass!" Nielsen hooted like an ornery owl. As if waffles and omelets weren't savory enough, her comment gave the surrounding families something tasty to chew on.

It was not the first time the public has singled out Nielsen. Standing taller than 6 feet, garnished in thick makeup and toting a suitcase-sized purse, she's no dainty grandmother type. In grade school and high school in the 1940s and '50s, when Paula was still going by her original name, Larry, she was teased for being a sissy, for being different.

Nielsen was born in Portland in 1938. When she was 12, an "innately effeminate boy" at the time, she accepted Christ as her personal savior at the Powellhurst Baptist Church. She said she never would have survived her tumultuous and turbulent years without her religious convictions and born-again experience.

"God accepted me as I am," she said. "If I didn't have my religion, I wouldn't have gotten through it."

In 1952, during Nielsen's freshman year in high school, Christine Jorgenson (formerly George) became the world's first known male-to-female "transsexual," a term coined by her doctor, Harry Benjamin. That year, Jorgenson traveled to Denmark to undergo the first sex-change surgery.

"When I read Christine's story in the Sunday paper, I knew that was me," Nielsen said.

During the early '60s, Nielsen moved from Portland to Oakland, Calif., then soon after to San Francisco, where she transitioned from male to female. She attended church and worked as a secretary at an insurance company, completely passing as a woman.

"I didn't feel like I was fooling anyone," she said. "I was just being myself."

She points out that during those years, the only time it was safe for drag queens to dress up was Halloween or New Year's Eve and that trans people could not legally change their names without proof of an operation.

"Now, the trans thing is no big thing like it was back then," she said.

While calling transsexualism "one of the most misunderstood subjects there is," she acknowledges the enlightenment that has come through years of education and work. She considers the success of the 1999 film *Boys Don't Cry* a breakthrough in trans recognition; however, "the people that should really see it are the ones that won't cross the street to go see it," she said.

Despite these advancements, "Only trans people can understand trans people," she added.

During the past few decades, the trans community has embraced the term *transgendered* because it is more inclusive, she said.

"(The two terms) mean the same thing, but *transgendered* makes it more acceptable for you to be trans without getting an operation," she



PHOTO BY DALE MONTGOMERY

said. "I like to use the word *trans* as an umbrella term."

After Nielsen had soaked up enough of San Francisco, she moved back to Portland in the '70s. "As far as I'm concerned, Portland's the only place to live," she told me over breakfast.

Now, having spent much of her long life in Rip City, Nielsen has a library's worth of knowledge about what once was a very conservative small town. She remembers Portland's first gay pride celebration as "a few literature booths and a beer track at Waterfront Park."

Back then, the event drew almost 200 people. Pride officials estimate this year's festival drew almost 30,000.

"I see gay pride day as a gay Fourth of July, a gay Independence Day," Nielsen said, adding that she is put off by the divisiveness and misunderstandings in the community. "Gay people are just like straight people. Everyone has their own agenda."

In 1989, Nielsen discovered a medium to combine her religion and her unique perspective on life: television. She launched *Let's Have Church*, a cable access show in Portland, and began calling herself the Drag Evangelist.

"I wanted a term that would make me different than every other evangelist," she said. She later took up the moniker Trans Evangelist.

About 10 years later, after becoming a publicly recognized figure in Oregon, Washington and California and being interviewed by the British Broadcasting Corp. and *Strange Universe*, Nielsen broadcast her final program.

Regardless, religion still plays a major role in her life. When she speaks, she assumes the deep and convincing voice of a preacher; her views are opinionated and unwavering.

"I'm very conservative in some ways," Nielsen said. "I believe prayer and the Ten Commandments should be in schools. But I also support sensitivity training. It's good to teach kids about gays and lesbians early on."

The 2000 Spirit of Pride Award recipient recently turned 62 and officially retired. Next up, she plans to create a biography and documentary of her life.

"My purpose here isn't done yet," she said.

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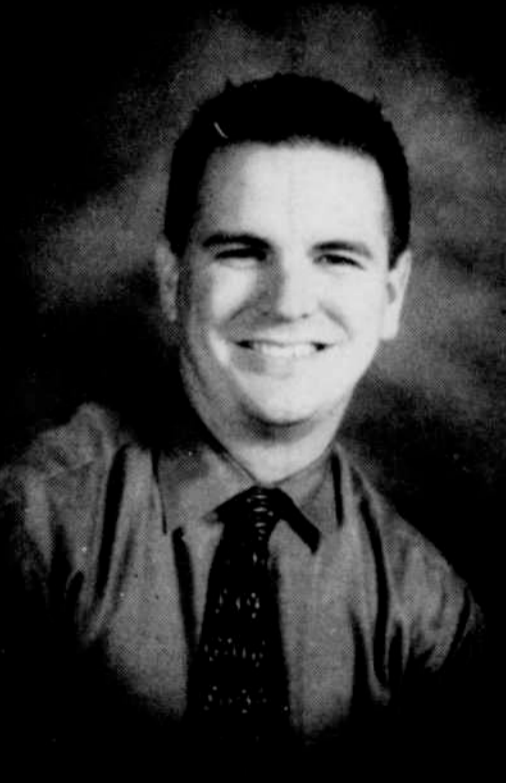


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