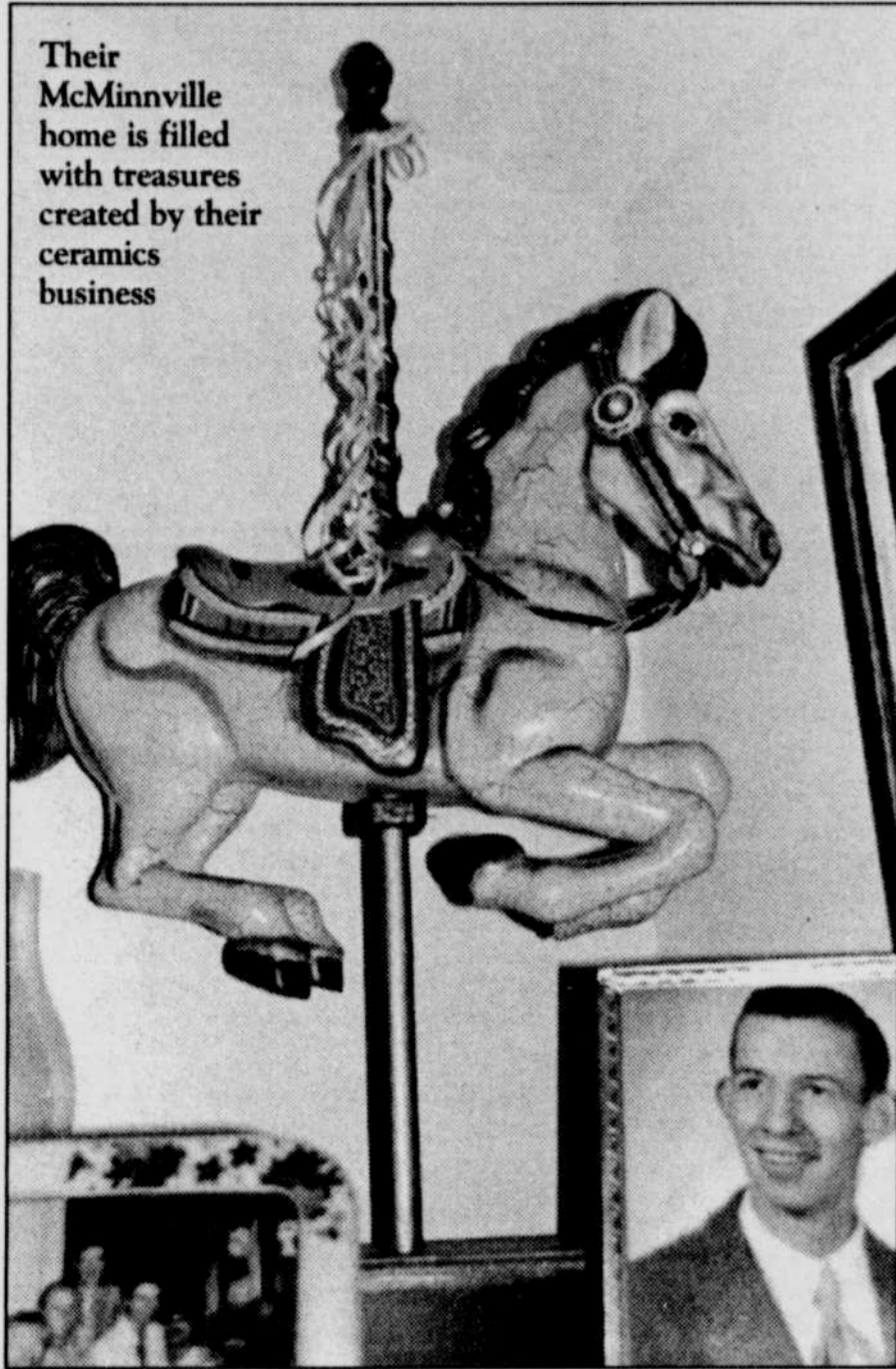


Their McMinnville home is filled with treasures created by their ceramics business



MAKING THE TRANSITION

Through veracity and conviction, Debra Walker has learned how to be herself

BY TIMOTHY KRAUSE

For two years, rumors had gone on here," Debra Walker recalls, "as if the mailman would knock on the door, deliver the mail and ask, 'Have you heard about the sergeant in the sheriff's office having a sex change?'"

Soon, however, it was Walker who was doing the talking. In a candid interview with the McMinnville News-Register last February, this 50-year-old sergeant from the Yamhill County Sheriff's Office openly discussed her recent transition from male to female. She revealed intimate details of how he became she, how Dave became Debra.

"This is a hard place to have done something like this. I've had a bad two years here," she remarks. "It's been hell, but I've made the best of it and tried to keep going because I'm educating

implications, meeting with therapists and researching what they quickly learned to be gender dysphoria—a recognized disconnect over gender between mind and body.

In 1983, the couple moved from their native California to McMinnville. Walker joined the sheriff's office, and Cathy began studies in nursing. But after experiencing years of ongoing frustration and depression, Walker resolved to make a change rather than suffer the consequences, including the risk of suicide.

"I'm someone who deals with weapons and the people who find the efficient ways to commit suicide," she explains. "I'll give you a dozen ways you'll do it right the first time. But it is also something that, from my job, I know accomplishes nothing. The rational side of me says you don't think about that, because it only causes harm to other people."

Instead, Walker began to plan for permanent gender transition. "I pretty much just said that when I retire, I'm going to go there, and hopefully Cathy will come with me," she relates.

And Cathy did.

"We're both very much in love with the person, not the gender," Walker has said. "It's what's on the inside that counts."

Cathy told the McMinnville News-Register: "Sure, we've had to

"We do it in part because we want our neighbors and people from our church to meet other gay people," Hutchinson says. "Everyone always has a good time."

In fact, their openness has worked miracles in many ways, Hutchinson says, noting that one of their elderly neighbors "chased Lon Mabon's people off her porch with a broom." He adds matter-of-factly, "We are friends."

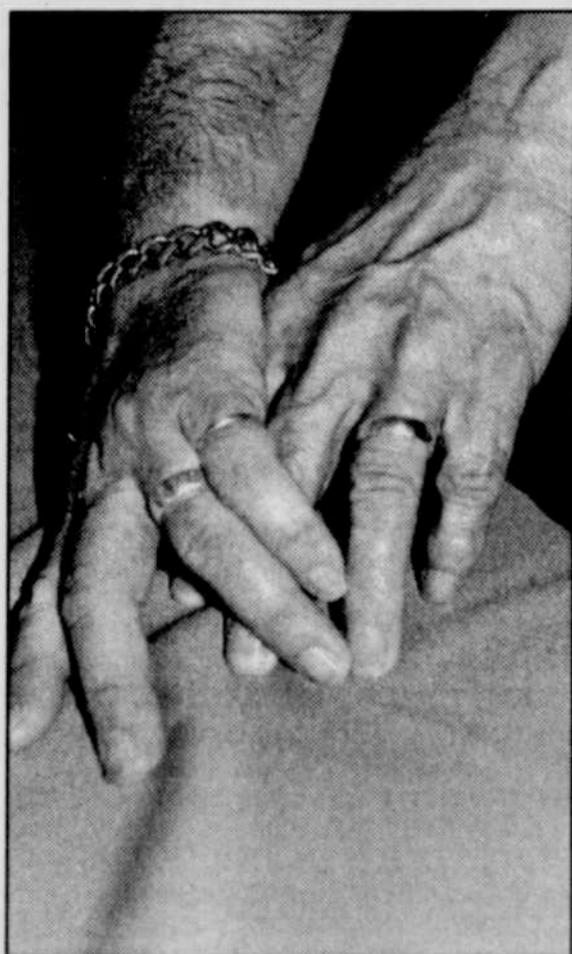
So, as the couple look forward to celebrating their 43rd anniversary in March, they insist their love never has been stronger.

"I never, ever stopped loving him," Hutchinson says as he glances over at Swantek. "I love him more and more each year."

Swantek agrees. "We work well together. It has never occurred to us that we wouldn't be together. We are together...we help each other...we love each other."

As the interview comes to an end, Hutchinson stands behind Swantek, gently massaging his shoulders. They continue to finish each other's sentences. They continue to talk about a life well lived.

If only everyone could be so lucky.



"We work well together. It has never occurred to us that we wouldn't be together. We are together... we help each other... we love each other."

—Lee Swantek



Despite an exemplary record, Debra Walker has been the subject of several internal investigations since her gender change

everybody here as we go. They've watched this transition from Day One. They've seen that there isn't a giant change in personality. There's just a change in appearance."

In many ways, Walker could be considered a role model for successful gender transition. Although faced with significant obstacles, she didn't lose her spouse. Unlike many, she didn't lose her job. And she didn't move away from her home.

Walker first knew something was different when she was a child. She was born a boy but knew inside she was a girl. When she acknowledged the discrepancy between her internal feelings and her external body, she didn't know what to do about it.

So she continued life as a male, serving in the military, joining law enforcement and getting married. It wasn't long into the relationship, however, before she confided in Cathy her true feelings. Both struggled with this emerging identity, discussing the

work it out. There are times when I'm sure we would've both thrown up our hands and walked away, but we didn't."

Her spouse explains: "For me, it became such a strong compulsion. I was becoming that person more and more. Sooner or later, it was going to be found out that I had a second life."

Walker's growing compulsion didn't allow her to wait the five years until retirement. She began electrolysis in 1995 and hormone treatment in 1997.

Two years later, the changes were so evident that she felt both encouraged and constrained to go public. In April 1999, with reassignment surgery planned for February 2000, she announced her transition to the sheriff's office and the community.

"In my law enforcement career, I've kicked down doors of drug

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