

About 24 years ago, Debbie and Sandra Knudsen were married for better or for worse. And while the union has had its victories and struggles like any other, their individual journeys have made their partnership extraordinary.

Just two years into their young marriage, Debbie returned home after a weekend away and discovered a woman's nightgown slung across her bed. She was angry and hurt, suspecting infidelity. When she confronted her husband, he offered a life-changing confession. The nightgown did not belong to an imaginary mistress; it belonged to him.

Growing up as a young boy in South Dakota, Sandra knew she was different. As a child she nonchalantly announced at the dinner table that she wanted to have a sex-change operation. Horrified, her mother sent her to spend hours in a minister's office, hoping the fear of God would cure her son's gender trouble. It didn't.

Sandra grew up feeling that she was a woman but knowing that her feelings had to be kept secret.

After confessing her desire to cross-dress to Debbie, Sandra was able to wear women's clothing in the house on a limited basis. Finally, nearly two decades after she had first begun her gender exploration with Debbie, Sandra was able to identify herself as transgendered.

Initially, Debbie struggled with the changes she saw in her partner. "Sandra was really excited, and I felt like I was the roadblock. I just wasn't ready to say, 'Oh, I love that wig!' I had to step back and take time for myself. I was thinking, 'Who is this person, and where did my husband go?'"

After waiting her whole life to live in the world as a woman, Sandra was anxious to change her appearance and begin her new life. The hardest lesson she learned, and the advice she most often offers to others in transition, is one of patience.

"You've got to be as slow as a snail. You know where you want to be; you've been thinking of it your whole life. But you've got to give [your partner] time to catch up."

Searching for resources and education, Debbie joined Sandra at meetings of Northwest Gender Alliance in Portland. Though Debbie was well received at the functions, no other partners were there.

NWGA was not interested in starting a group for families and partners of trans folks, and Debbie was searching for other people who shared her

SUPPORT SYSTEM

Groups create an environment of support and education for trans people and their partners by Eric Plemons

experience. "There was no place for Debbie at all when I started transitioning," Sandra remembers.

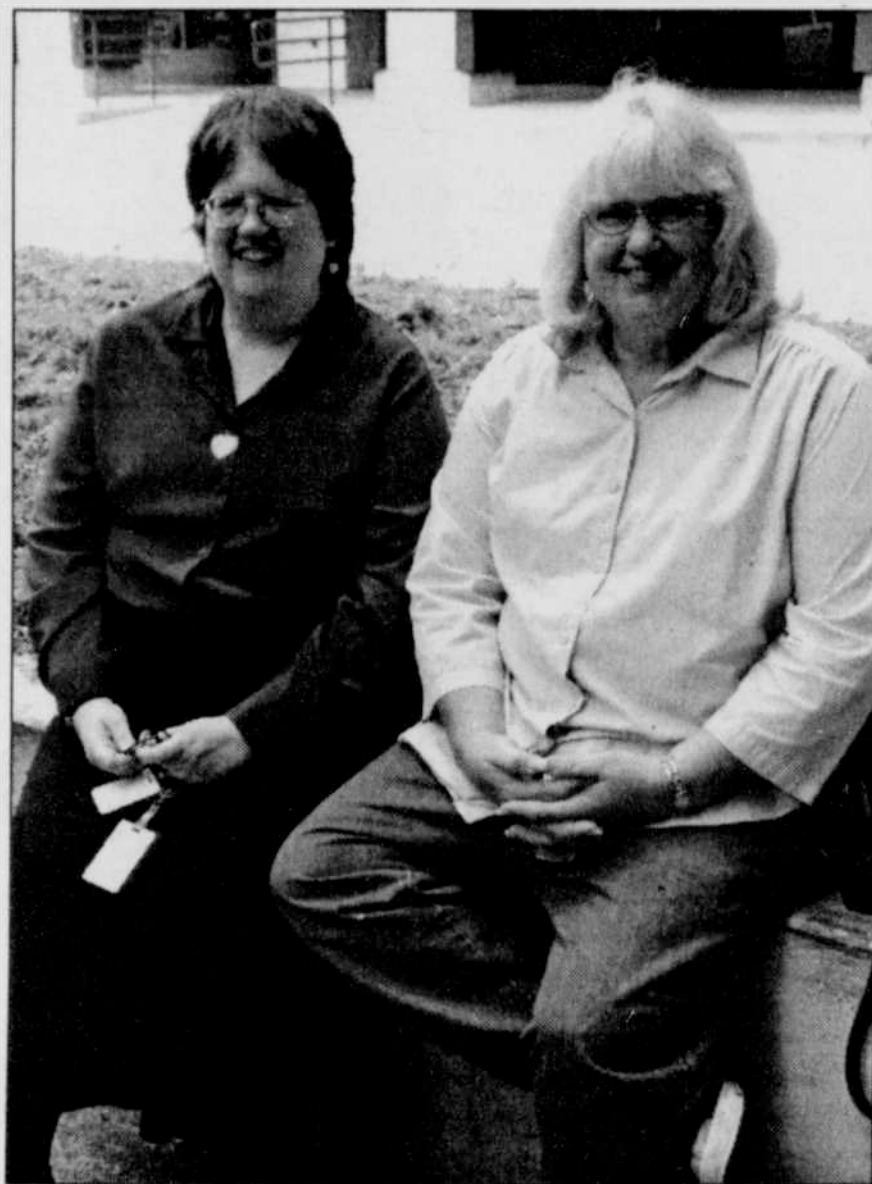
When Sandra became a board member of the annual Esprit convention in Port Angeles, Wash., Debbie worked with organizer Sandra Cole to build a Significant Other program. "Esprit was nice, but it only lasted for a week. It just wasn't long enough," she says.

Early this year, the church the Knudsen's regularly attend announced that it was open to starting new groups. The couple decided that since the support network they were seeking did not exist, they would create their own. Sandra had previously worked to have gender identity included in the open and affirming statement at the church, and its leaders are openly queer, so she was confident that they would provide a welcome meeting space for all people.

In February, TransFamilies began to meet at First Congregational United Church of Christ in the South Park Blocks. Debbie wanted to create an environment of support and education for families and friends of trans people.

"I try to bring in pertinent community news," she says. "After that it is a freeform, confidential, open session for people to talk about just about anything. Common topics include how to come out about your trans partner to family members, fear of reactions and how to be an ally to your trans partner or trans friends in the world."

Debbie understands that not every story will end as happily as hers. But though she is Sandra's greatest supporter now, it was not always so easy for her. Debbie remembers



By sharing their success story, Debbie (left) and Sandra Knudsen give hope to other people dealing with similar challenges

struggling with Sandra's emerging identity, then realizing: "I was drawn to her as a sensitive person. I couldn't ask her to be a macho man when that sensitivity drew me to her in the first place."

She witnesses many strong emotions in her group. "People have a right to have a negative attitude. They may never accept it, but I hope they'll come to peace with it."

Christa-Margaret Nelson, an active church member and a trans woman, attended an early meeting of TransFamilies. Though she was not partnered at the time, she feels the information and support offered in the group would have been invaluable to her past relationships.

"There are so many things you get drug into when you become involved with a trans per-

son," she says. She recalls a powerful discussion focused on the ways that transition affects the nontrans partner. "One participant reflected on how her partner's trans identity influenced her own queer identity and self-concept. I had never heard these kinds of conversations happening in that way before."

TransFamilies filled a much greater need in the community than the Knudsen's anticipated. Many trans-identified people began to attend the group along with family members, or on their own. In May, Sandra decided to facilitate a second group, TransCircle, specifically for trans people.

Debbie feels the split is beneficial to both groups. "The beginning of a transition is a stressful few months. There is lots of sharing to do. I want family members to have a free voice. It also allows trans folks a trans-only space."

Nelson also found the separate groups to be a positive change. "It is important for families and partners to feel comfortable without the trans person there so they can talk without being worried about offending anyone," she says.

It is also a boon that the groups meet at the same time, just one door away. "It creates an opportunity for a trans person and their partner to come to different groups at the same time. Sometimes toward the end of a meeting, the groups join so that we can share information or ask questions," Debbie says. "People have hope for their families' acceptance when they hear success stories."

Sandra adds: "TransCircle is a place for trans people to discuss family, transitioning, work issues, etc. We are all there to learn from others' experiences. It is nice to be in a room full of transgendered people. We have so much in common, even if we are completely different in other ways."

These meetings have given the Knudsen's an opportunity to share their unique experiences with other people dealing with similar challenges. The couple feel Sandra's transition was not just a process that she went through but one that they each experienced as individuals, together.

"Come down, we're glad to have you," Debbie says with a warm smile on her face. "We welcome anyone with questions—partners, kids, friends. Education is really important. People find out that it really is not a scary thing." □

TRANSFAMILIES and TRANSCIRCLE hold accessible, confidential and free meetings 1 p.m. on the third Saturday of every month (except October) at First Congregational United Church of Christ, 1126 S.W. Park Ave.

ERIC PLEMONS is a Portland free-lance writer.

"People have a right to have a negative attitude. They may never accept it, but I hope they'll come to peace with it."

—Debbie Knudsen

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