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Title

Barbara Satin Oral History Interview and Transcript

Date

October 16, 2015

Extant

56 minutes interview (4 files) and 1 transcript

Abstract

In this oral history, Barbara Satin, a transgender activist around issues of aging, faith and gender justice, discusses leaving Catholic seminary due to her awareness of her gender identity, and living as a man until age 54, when she came out with the help of her adult children. The interview explores her work establishing a senior housing project for LGBTQ people in Minneapolis, then as the first openly transgender member of the Executive Council at UCC, later serving on presidential advisory panels.

Biographical

Barbara Satin, a transgender activist around issues of aging, faith and gender justice, was born in 1934 in St. Paul, Minnesota. Her father died a year-and-a-half later, leaving her mother to raise four children with the help of supportive relatives. Roman Catholicism was deeply engrained in the family; all children went to Catholic schools and the church was an important part of their daily lives. Raised as a boy, Barbara was aware of her gender difference at an early age but had no vocabulary or ideas with which to understand and address it. She only knew that she needed to hide her differences in order to survive.

After two years living away from home as a young teenage seminarian, Barbara realized a call to priestly ministry wasn't going to work because of her gender issues, so she left the seminary and finished up at a local Catholic high school. After high school, Barbara studied at a local Catholic college, focusing first on philosophy, then graduating with a degree in sociology. One vivid memory of those college years was the national media attention in late 1952 around

Christine Jorgensen who had sexual reassignment surgery in Denmark. This was Barbara's first awareness that there were other people like her.

When Barbara graduated from college, she received a commission as an officer in the U. S. Air Force. It was a macho way of distracting any attention from her gender dilemma. She was in pilot training in Texas for a year before a kidney infection ended her flying career and she was given a medical discharge. When she returned to St. Paul, where she fell in love and hoped that marriage would bring an end to her gender issues. The marriage was blessed with three wonderful children.

Barbara (still living as a man) had a successful business career as director of public relations for a major international firm and was also a prominent leader in the Roman Catholic Diocese as well as a well-respected civic activist. While issues of gender identity were present throughout these years, Barbara was committed to the responsibilities of raising a family as well as being a successful provider. At age 54, Barbara took early retirement and then began to explore more fully her transgender identity.

With the support of her children and a knowledgeable therapist, Barbara came to understand that her transgender identity was how God had made her and rather than being a curse it could be a blessing in her life. As a way to more fully explore her identity, she moved out of the family home to live full-time as Barbara. (she since has returned). She also left the Catholic Church at that time, feeling that there was no place for a trans women to be of service in that denomination.

After a period of trying to be spiritual on her own, Barbara found that she missed being part of a faith community, so she decided to visit Spirit of the Lakes Church in Minneapolis. The congregation was made up primarily of LGBT persons and was the first LGBT church in a major Christian denomination. Barbara quickly found a spiritual home there and became a leader in the congregation. Through Spirit of the Lakes she became part of the United Church Coalition for LGBT Concerns (now the Open and Affirming Coalition of the UCC). As an active member of the United Church of Christ and the leader of the Coalition, she served on the denomination's Executive Council as its first openly transgender member; she was involved in the church's 2003 decision to affirm the inclusion of transgender people in the full life and ministry of the church.

Barbara also provided leadership for the development of Spirit on Lake, a LGBTQ senior housing project in Minneapolis. The housing project had its genesis in the work on LGBTQ aging issues started by Barbara and members and pastoral leadership of Spirit of the Lakes Church. The 46-unit, affordable rental facility opened in September 2013. At the time it was only the second such project in the U.S.

In February 2015, Barbara was invited to the White House to talk to the Administration about housing concerns for LGBTQ seniors and in July 2015 she was one of three LGBTQ people invited to participate for the first time in the White House Conference on Aging. Barbara also sits on the boards of a number of non-profits that serve LGBTQ people in the areas of philanthropy, training of senior care providers and HIV/AIDS services.

Barbara serves as Assistant Faith Work Director for The National LGBTQ Task Force where her responsibilities include working for the full inclusion of trans persons in communities of faith. She retired from that position in February 2022.

Scope and Content

In this oral history, Barbara Satin, a transgender activist around issues of aging, faith and gender justice, discusses leaving seminary due to her awareness of her gender identity, and living as a man until age 54, when she was able to come out. She was the first openly transgender member of the Executive Council at UCC, was involved in the church's decision to affirm the inclusion of transgender people. She led a senior housing project for LGBTQ people, and spoke on the issue at the White House.

This interview was conducted by Mark Bowman, the executive director of LGBT-RAN. He holds a Master of Divinity degree from Boston University School of Theology and has played a key leadership role in establishing a number of religious ventures and programs.

Access

Open to all researchers.

<https://lgbtqreligiousarchives.org/oral-histories/barbara-satin>.

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Languages

Collection material is in English

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