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For Transgender People, Name Is a Message

By WILLIAM GLABERSON
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Katherine used to be Miguel. Olin had a girl's name. And in October, Robert Ira Schnur, 70, became Roberta Iris Schnur, a Manhattan retiree with magenta lipstick and, she noted the other day, chipped silver nail polish.

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"I wasn't like other men," she said.



Todd Heisler/The New York Times
ROBERTA IRIS SCHNUR
Formerly Robert Ira Schnur, she is one of hundreds of transgender people whose legal names were changed in Manhattan.

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Ms. Schnur's former identification photos.

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KATHERINE CROSS said that in her case, "the centerpiece was the name change."

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Todd Heisler/The New York Times
EM WHITNEY said his name change was part of a long gender journey from a girl's name.

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Todd Heisler/The New York Times
KIT YAN Shedding "Laura" felt like giving away, say, an ugly Christmas sweater.

The process of changing a name can be intimidating, said Kit Yan, a 25-year-old poetry slam artist and performer with a hint of facial hair who was born Laura. He failed twice when he tried on his own to get the law to recognize the name a friend suggested after seeing a cartoon character named Kit that looked like him, a little boy in a suit.

With a lawyer in May, Mr. Yan said, he felt relief when he heard "Laura" to summon him for the last time when his case was called. "It felt like giving away, say, an ugly Christmas sweater your mom made you," Mr. Yan said.

The two recent rulings in New York courts helped clear the way for more such moments on Centre Street.

In one case, an appeals panel overruled a Manhattan civil court judge who had insisted on doctors' notes giving reasons for name changes in transgender cases. The panel said there was "no sound basis in law or policy" for the requirement and noted that the law generally permits people to change their names unless there is some fraudulent intent involved.

In the other decision, a Westchester judge made an exception to a general requirement that name changes and home addresses be advertised in newspapers, saying the safety issues for people in gender transition were obvious in a world that can be hostile.

The publication requirement insisted upon by some of the Manhattan judges has fed an eerie subculture of readers, many of them prisoners, who follow the newspaper notices. One man forced to advertise that he was becoming a woman received several seductive letters with prison return addresses. "Hello Angel!" said one of the letters. "I am not afraid to take new roads," said another.

At the gray Manhattan courthouse, where matters like debt collection are the bulk of the work, officials said they were aware of numerous transgender name-change cases.

But those petitions are mixed in with more traditional name-change filings, like applications from immigrants Anglicizing their names. Name-change cases over all increased at the court to 3,109 in 2009 from 202 in 1995, but officials said they did not keep count of the reasons for the requests.

Gender switches would not necessarily draw much attention at the courthouse, said the court's supervising judge, Jeffrey K. Oing. New York being New York, he said, the threshold for surprise can be high. There was a "buzz in the courthouse," he conceded, after one man renamed himself Jesus Christ.

But the judge said he was not surprised to hear that transgender people had found a receptive audience in many of the 10 Civil Court judges in Manhattan. "I like to think that we live in a very open society here in New York County," he said.

Still, routine changing of gender identification can be startling to some. The Rev. Jason J. McGuire, executive director of New Yorkers for Constitutional Freedoms, which helped defeat the gay-marriage proposal in Albany, said the courts might be ahead of the public on gender issues.

"Oftentimes, the courts are used to advance an agenda," he said, adding that the name changes created loopholes people could use to hide for any number of reasons.

Some of the Centre Street petitioners said they did in fact want to obliterate their old identities. The newly named Em Whitney, a 23-year-old with a toothy smile and a button nose, said the change was part of a long gender journey that began when he was a Texas child with a girl's name and a fascination with androgynous characters like Peter Pan and Shakespeare's Puck.

Mr. Whitney, who has written for The [New York Observer](#) newspaper and sometimes introduces himself as Emerson, said daily experiences like presenting a driver's license could be a minefield. "Showing someone a picture and a name of someone who doesn't exist drove me crazy," he said.

Ms. Schnur, the retiree who changed her name in October, took out some old identification cards to make a similar point. The pictures of the man with thinning hair never seemed right, she said.

"I always knew that I wasn't what other people thought I was," she said.

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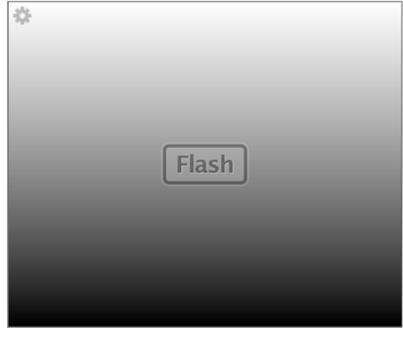
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