Darla Lannert: Passionate Advocate for the Trans Community

"I was never so frightened in my life." Darla Lannert was not talking about the time someone in a bar held a gun to her head and told her that "people like you shouldn't be allowed to live." Darla was referring to the fear she felt when, as a man, she knew she needed to tell her wife, Mary, and their three adult children that she needed to transition to become a woman.

"You risk losing everyone and everything that matters in your life," Darla explained. "But I knew I had to do it."

Now she has not only fully embraced her new self, she has become among the state's most outspoken advocates for transgender people in her role as volunteer at OutReach. "I didn't think I could be a public speaker. But from the beginning I spoke from the heart, and I've been speaking out ever since.

"If I can assist or advocate for any trans person—especially young trans people who commit suicide at such a high rate, I will do it."

Darla's help includes offering her skills listening and mentoring, sharing her home temporarily with homeless young trans adults, and being a vocal advocate at the State Capitol, at the VA Hospital, and at any business or organization that contacts OutReach wanting to learn more.

Community Shares group Disability Rights Wisconsin (DRW) is one nonprofit that enlisted Darla's help to ensure a safe and welcoming workplace for transgender employees and clients, notes Eva Shiffrin, DRW Managing Attorney. Darla consulted with DRW and trained its staff regarding transphobia and transgender rights. Eva noted that "Darla is an incredible activist for justice. It's not every person who can look a crowd in the face and speak about their personal, painful experiences with transphobia.

"Darla is able to change minds and hearts because she speaks with such genuine warmth and graciousness," Eva continued. "She has made it her life's passion to educate the public about transgender rights and safety issues. She tells audiences that every question is OK, even ones that might be perceived as transphobic, and she means it. People are moved to tears by her willingness to share her life experiences, which reveal how she has triumphed with her incredible bravery, strength, and kindness."

State Rep. Mark Spreitzer agreed that Darla's dedication to justice for the trans community is laudable. "Having worked with Darla directly on transgender issues in the Legislature, I can attest to her tireless commitment to transgender equality," said Rep. Spreitzer. "Darla is passionate about educating the broader community about transgender people and the issues they face, while creating safe spaces for transgender people to thrive."

Support from Family Gave Her Strength
There were many difficulties along the way, but Darla credits her former wife, Mary, with the ease of her transition. "I was fortunate to be married to Mary for 39 years. We went through years of therapy together, "I agree with Laverne Cox who says, 'It is revolutionary for any trans person to choose to be seen and visible in a world that tells us we should not exist.' "

"Of course everyone has trauma in their lives. For me it was active duty in Vietnam and sexual trauma. But those pale in comparison to the fear about coming out."
and she showed me so much compassion and understanding. She gave me the strength to move forward with my transition, and I can honestly say if it weren't for Mary, I wouldn't be here today."

Darla and Mary waited for several years to tell their two sons and one daughter, by then all adults, about Darla's plan to transition. A testament to the compassion no doubt modeled by both parents, Darla said their children's response was, "'We love you—it doesn't matter which gender you are.'

"Our daughter even said to me recently, 'I cannot believe how strong and wonderful you've become in such a short time.'"

That strength wasn't always there. "I couldn't even advocate for myself, let alone others," said Darla, about her arrival in Madison. But now Darla can encounter "every horrible, nasty comment you can think of. I will stand up to it because I will not allow anyone to discriminate against me.

"I'm protected here, but as soon as I leave Madison, or Dane County, those protections no longer apply. Milwaukee County is the other exception. Wisconsin has no housing and employment protections for trans people. In most of our state trans people can be fired, evicted, or otherwise discriminated against and the victim has no recourse," Darla explained.

Darla focuses on advocacy to create more equity in our laws, and to open people's minds. "When I'm able to let someone know it's OK to be you, and they free themselves from horrible dysphoria, it's tremendous. It's even better when you can keep your job, keep your home, and know that your spouse and children love you. But it's not like that for everyone."

**Mentoring Young Adults—And Offering Her Home to Others**
Darla extends great generosity in offering her home to those needing a place to stay until they settle on their feet. But she downplays her actions, saying "I'm just passing it on. When I was in need, I was taken in by my now-best friend Gina LaMay. She was my rock and strength as I moved forward in my transition. Gina shared her home with me, and offered me respect, compassion, and understanding."

"It's critical to find emergency services for young transgender adults—three of whom came into OutReach just last week, and we were able to keep them off the streets. In part it's because we have Community Shares of Wisconsin [CSW] providing funding for our work. We are so grateful that CSW exists."

In addition to volunteering at OutReach, Darla, a combat veteran in the Vietnam War, has volunteered on committees at the VA Hospital in Madison, focusing on issues related to mental health and homelessness. "The VA has been very forward thinking on trans issues. There are about 145,000 trans veterans like myself, and the VA provides healthcare to all of us. Let's give them kudos to the VA, which is the largest healthcare system in the country."

In fact the Madison VA Hospital was recently recognized as a “Leader in LGBT Healthcare Equality” by the Human Rights Campaign Foundation, the LGBT civil rights group.
Our Society's "Bathroom Bills"
“It's nonsense,” Darla said about our State Legislature's attempts to pass a so-called bathroom bill—requiring that students use the bathroom assigned them on their birth certificate—and accompanying claims that, without the bill, students are in danger. “Our lawmakers have so many more important issues they should be dealing with.

“Some states like Kansas even offer a $2,500 bounty for someone spotting a trans person using the 'wrong' bathroom. In the entire country, there has never been an instance of a trans person attacking someone in a bathroom. On the other hand, trans people are attacked in bathrooms all the time.

“These bills are hateful things, and serve only to promote fear-mongering,” Darla added. “It's why I was so happy to see the statement made by U.S. Attorney General, Loretta Lynch, when she filed suit against the North Carolina bathroom bill.” (See excerpts of Loretta Lynch's comments at the end of this piece.)

Offering People Hope
Referring again to the fear that consumes trans people before they come out, Darla said, “Of course everyone has trauma in their lives. For me it was active duty in Vietnam and sexual trauma. But those pale in comparison to the fear about coming out.

“I'm so fortunate that when I did take that step to let people know who I really am, my family accepted me. That includes seven siblings and 45 nieces and nephews who accept me. In fact 95% of everyone in my life accepted me. If my being out and doing what I do gives someone else hope to leave their house, then I've accomplished something.

Darla said she has a simple approach to working with people wanting to transition. "I offer them hope—hope that things will get better."

She said the principles that guide her work are equally simple: “Do something you're passionate about, and always be kind. It's how I try to live.”

Darla is the first to admit that she's passionate about what she's doing. And all those touched by her can attest to her kindness.

"Let us not act out of fear and misunderstanding, but out of the values of inclusion, diversity, and regard for all. . . . Let me also speak directly to the transgender community itself. No matter how isolated or scared you may feel today, the Department of Justice and the entire Obama Administration wants you to know that we see you; we stand with you; and we will do everything we can to protect you going forward. Please know that history is on your side. This country was founded on a promise of equal rights for all, and we have always managed to move closer to that promise, little by little, one day at a time."
~ U.S. Attorney General, Loretta Lynch

"The staff at William S. Middleton Memorial Veterans Hospital & Clinics is very pleased to hear that Darla Lannert is receiving this award. Darla has partnered with us on several occasions. She has regularly demonstrated her dedication, leadership, and commitment to equality. We look forward to continuing to work with and learn from Darla, and we congratulate her on this well-deserved award!"
~ Christine Kleckner, Assistant Director at the facility