

Robert Schwanhausser's life has two big chapters: one as a man and now one as a woman

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The summer before his surgery, Schwanhausser met his younger son, daughter-in-law and two grandchildren at Cedar Point amusement park in Ohio. Schwanhausser was dressed as a woman.

After a full day of riding roller coasters, Schwanhausser's son took the group to dinner. "What do you want, Daddy?" the son asked. "Oh, sorry. What would you like, Bobbi?"

Slow transition

Bobbi Swan is 6-foot-2, with hands and feet to match. Her voice is deep. "Over the phone," she said, "I sound like a man."

Biologically, she has been a woman since January 2003. Surgeons and pharmacists have given Swan functioning female genitalia, prominent breasts and a steady stream of hormones. After decades of pining for this transformation, she is living inside a woman's skin. Psychologically and emotionally, though, is she truly female?

"This is a very slow transition," she said. "I'm still adjusting to myself. It's a continual thing. It's a healthy thing."

From her perfume (Coty's Nokomis, strong jasmine and sandalwood notes), to her jewelry (delicate gold watch, slim gold necklace) to her outfits (high necklines and mid-calf hemlines), she's an old-fashioned lady. She has her hair done once a week, dishing with the stylist. She experiments with gel nails ("much better than acrylic") and polish (a favorite: OPI's Pompeii Purple). She reminds herself to walk with more hip action and less swagger from her wide shoulders.

At home in Clinton Township, Mich., she has girlfriends – most know her past – but no boyfriends.

Not yet, at least. "The right guy, the right place, the right time, who knows?" But at 76, romance is not a high priority.

Swan is not active in the gay, lesbian and transgendered advocacy circles. But she stays current on gender issues, and was taken aback by an angry letter to the editor that greeted Newsweek's recent cover story. Still, she noted that most of the letters were curious and thoughtful, rather than hostile.

She's also been buoyed by an unexpected development. Most of Schwanhausser's old colleagues, a conservative tribe, have responded to Swan with grace and encouragement.

"I never picked up a clue nor had any suspicions that cross-dressing or the desire to become a woman was such a powerful part of your inner self," Gene Timmons, a former Ryan engineer, wrote in a Christmas message to his old colleague. "I can only imagine the pain and anxiety you must have lived with over the years.

"To have overcome the staggering obstacles (emotional and physical) to make this change is quite remarkable and I am truly happy that it has worked out so well for you."

Swan insists that she's delighted with this change, and maintains it has given her new insight into all things female – including the travails of his former Ryan secretaries. Still, surgery and medication alone cannot turn a man into a woman. "I think the biggest changes come gradually. Like it would if you moved into a new area.

"You ease into it. It takes awhile before you are accepted."