

In My Own Words

BY JOY LADIN

When after five years of teaching at Yeshiva University, Joy Ladin began her gender transition, she was put on indefinite research leave by her employers. Lambda Legal sent a demand letter to university administration, and a few weeks later, with the overwhelming support of her students and colleagues, she was permitted to return to her post. Here is her story.



Joy Ladin

time, most notably me. Prior to receiving tenure, I had taught for five years as Jay Ladin, a bearded, *kippah*-wearing man. Once my tenure came through, I wrote a letter to my Dean, informing her that I would now be teaching as Joy Ladin, a transgender woman.

Gender transition tends to rattle employers. But since Yeshiva University is the premier institution of higher education associated with modern Orthodox Judaism, the rattle was more like an earthquake. I wasn't the university's first transgender employee, but I was the first who came out publicly, the first who was a faculty member, and thus the first to force the university to decide whether Orthodox tradition or modern law — in this case New York State and City's Human Rights Laws — would determine their policy on gender expression.

The Dean responded to my coming-out letter by telling me that I would continue receiving full salary and benefits, but students and their families could never accept someone like me as a faculty member. I would be placed on fully paid leave until I found other employment. In the meantime, I was not to set foot on campus.

An English professor's return to work doesn't generally make headlines, but last September, mine did. It had been a long time since I'd actually been to work; 15 months before, right after being granted early tenure at Stern College for Women of Yeshiva University, I had been placed on "indefinite research leave." A lot had changed in that

It was the most cordial, respectful, well-funded form of discrimination possible, but it was still discrimination, and I, who had lived until then as a middle-class white male, was thoroughly shocked.

The administration didn't tell my students or colleagues why I was suddenly on leave, but word leaked out through the Internet, and by the middle of the fall in 2007, students began emailing me. Some were relieved (they had feared I was dying); some were confused; most, including some of the most politically and culturally conservative, wrote to tell me that they supported my transition even if they didn't completely understand it. Not one student, then or since, suggested that they couldn't accept a transgender professor.

Buoyed by my students' response, I asked the administration to reconsider my return to teaching. Once again, I was assured that that was impossible. But though the rhetoric remained the same, something had changed. Lambda Legal attorneys, who had been guiding and supporting me through the coming-out process, sent a letter a few weeks later demanding that I be allowed to teach. After a couple weeks of silence, we received an astonishing response: Yes.

And so, in early September, as a *New York Post* photographer snapped pictures, I became Yeshiva University's — and the Orthodox Jewish world's — first officially accepted transsexual. Though the headlines sparked a vigorous, ongoing discussion in the Jewish world, in the classroom I've found that my students are much more interested in their grades than in my gender. There have been no demonstrations, no drops in donations or enrollments, not even a disrespectful word or glance. The biggest effect of my transition has been outside the school. Neither the transgender Jews hiding within traditional communities nor the traditionalists opposed to any variant gender expression had believed a transsexual could live openly and productively in the Orthodox world. For them, when I returned to work, the world was forever changed.