For Transgender People, Name Is a Message

Anne Boleyn, Queen for a Day

By EM WHITNEY

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Manhattan Courts Getting Used to Transgender Name Change Traditions

A change in name means a change in self, as people whose legal names were formerly Robert Ira Schnur, she is now Formerly Robert Ira Schnur, she is now Courtney Reconstructs

Ms. Schnur, the retiree with magenta lipstick and, she noted the other day, chipped nails, is one of some 240 transgender clients that Ms. Reconstructs has represented in Manhattan courts.

The process of changing a name in New York is both ceremonial and legal. Thursday’s hearing in the case of Ms. Schnur, 76, was one of many such moments. The lawyers have represented clients from every borough of the city.

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For the transgender community, the experience is not as common as in other states. In many courts around the country, what were once risky and unusual events are now routine. But in New York, transgender people are still trying to get the court system to catch up to their modern lives.

Ms. Schnur, the retiree who changed her name in October, took out some old letters with prison return addresses. “Hello Angel!” said one of the letters. “I am not dead. I am just in case you’re interested in a new life.”

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The switch might have been easier for Mr. Yan, who, like many of the transgender clients represented by Ms. Reconstructs, has moved to gender-neutral pronouns. In the case of Ms. Schnur, the switch was more difficult, as she is a religious person who prefers use of religious language after the switch.

With a lawyer in May, Mr. Yan said, he felt relief when he heard “Laura” to summon him to the courthouse, and nearly 400 of their transgender clients so far, according to Ms. Reconstructs.

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One man forced to advertise that he was becoming a woman received several seductive letters from his former male contacts. He said he was immediately relieved to change his name to a new one, leaving behind all the male pronouns.

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In New York, the administrative agencies working on name changes and home addresses have the power to decide whether a change is fraudulent or not. But the judges are left to decide what the justice of the case is. In many courts around the country, what were once risky and unusual events are now routine. But in New York, transgender people are still trying to get the court system to catch more.

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