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A Leap of Faith

Before transitioning two decades ago, corporate head Stephanie Battaglino needed the buy-in not of the boardroom, but of her then-10 year old son, Andrew.

Words by Kay Kudukis • Photos by Donato Di Natale

In high school in mid-1970s New Jersey, Michael Battaglino was a good Catholic boy and likable jock who played football and wrestled. He received a football scholarship to the University of Delaware, and married his college sweetheart. What no one knew is that his entire façade was an act. Had there been an Academy Award for best job at hiding yourself, the girl inside Michael — who would eventually claim her name, Stephanie — would have won.

Stephanie spent decades struggling to live up to the Y chromosome she'd mistakenly received in vitro, marrying a total of three times in the process. The third union was the longest, and produced a son, Andrew — the apple of his father's eye.

By the time Andrew was nine, Michael had earned an MBA, and his star was on the rise at work. Crossdressing, something he'd done from a young age, was getting harder to hide, especially at home. Sharing everything with your spouse but your core identity is not the recipe for a good marriage.

Stephanie found likeminded people on the internet, and they would meet secretly. Andrew's mother caught on, and the promises Michael made were not promises Stephanie could keep. One tortured night, his wife said it out loud at the kitchen table: This is not going away.

"The hardest thing I ever had to tell my son wasn't anything related to my gender. It was telling him we were splitting up as a family," Stephanie laments today.

The divorce was swift, but far from painless. Both parents were cognizant of how incredibly confusing this could be for a boy who hadn't even reached puberty. But Stephanie knew without a doubt, "I was going to do whatever I needed to do to ensure I was in his life, and he was in mine."

Was it easy? Hell, no! Therapists were involved, and strong emotions came to the surface, resulting in the occasional screaming match. In the end, it all clicked into place for Andrew one Sunday when Stephanie took him to the Church of the Redeemer. Episcopalian by denomination, the Church practices radical hospitality, and that day it was filled to capacity with LGBTQ believers called to worship. That kind of immersion, in a world of acceptance and unconditional love, made a huge impact on the teen. "It was one of the best things Steph could have done for me," Andrew, 29, now says.

Today, he's the lead construction manager for Sciamé Homes, a high-end residential construction management firm with offices in New York City and Florida. But he still recalls that day in church, when he finally, wholly got it. "No matter what, my dad's always gonna be my parent. My dad's always gonna love and support me, whether man or a woman. Steph and Dad are singular."

With Andrew now on board, it was time for Stephanie to deal with her workplace. Since she was a corporate vice president at New York Life Insurance Company, a position of power, word of her transition would be loud. She feared the classically conservative Fortune 100 company might just let her go. Instead, they let her open doors.

There was shock for some. Others had already noticed her bolder choices in attire. But the only thing her colleagues and direct reports wanted to know was, "What do



we call you?” She introduced herself, and that was that. By then in her mid-40s, she was finally living as her authentic self, becoming the first person to transition on the job at New York Life.

Authenticity came with unexpected challenges, which she writes about in her book, “Reflections From Both Sides of the Glass Ceiling: Finding My True Self in Corporate America.” The good news, as she tells it, is that she was accepted as a woman at work. The bad? Gender now played into her male colleagues’ perception of her capabilities. That was a startling, unwelcome welcome to womanhood. It’s also when she realized her calling: helping others through the door New York Life let her open.

Alongside kindred-spirit co-workers, Stephanie launched the company’s first LGBTQ employee resource group, and spearheaded more than \$200,000 in grants to New York City’s Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Community Center, “established in 1983 at the height of the AIDS crisis to provide a safe and affirming place for LGBTQ+ New Yorkers to respond to the urgent threats facing the community,” per the org’s website.

Stephanie also received a certificate from the UCLA Anderson School of Management’s LGBT Leadership

Institute, enhancing her “side hustle” as an internationally recognized speaker, workshop presenter, trainer, and LGBTQ+ workplace inclusion consultant.

That’s how she met her wife, Mari. Together since 2008, and married for eight years, they relocated to the Coachella Valley when Stephanie retired from corporate life. In need of continuing gender-affirming health care, she soon became a patient of Physician Assistant Bruce Hinton at DAP Health’s Stonewall Medical Center in Cathedral City.

Hinton recalls an early conversation they had about how California now provides financial assistance for trans people. It’s a state benefit Stephanie was never able to access for herself. She surprised him by expressing genuine happiness that such help is available today. “It would be easy to say ‘Well, damnit, I had to pay for it.’ But that wasn’t where she came from,” Hinton says. “She showed a really generous heart.”

Although Andrew lives in Hoboken, New Jersey, he and Stephanie remain close, visiting at the holidays, and again last February, when they participated in the Tour de Palm Springs together. He’s happy she got to make that very personal decision 20 years ago. “As long as her personal decision to love me never changes,” he says, “I’m OK.”