Project Helps Transgender Individuals Build New Identities

People seek name changes for a variety of reasons, sometimes to reflect their changed marital status, sometimes to recognize a new family relationship, and sometimes just on a whim. But for people who are transgender, name changes can have a deep effect on many aspects of their lives, ranging from their ability to find employment to their sense of comfort and security living in the gender with which they identify.

Rhys was born biologically female, but eventually realized that his biological sex did not reflect his understanding of his own gender. He recently made the decision to transition genders, a complex process that included asking those he knew to call him by his new name. However, his Social Security card and state ID did not reflect the new name he used every day, nor did it match the changes in his appearance.

This difference can affect transgender individuals' ability to obtain employment and public benefits. Even simple tasks like passing a building's security system can be complex for those whose gender presentation does not match their identification.

"At first I looked into doing the name change myself, but once I got to thinking about what was involved, the obstacles seemed insurmountable," Rhys noted.

Rhys connected with the Name Change Project at the Transgender Legal Defense and Education Fund (TLDEF), a civil rights organization that works to end discrimination based on gender identity and expression. Through the facilitation of NYLPT's Pro Bono Clearinghouse, TLDEF works with Morrison & Foerster LLP and Sullivan & Cromwell LLP to help transgender individuals navigate the sometimes daunting name change process.

"Our clients are largely poor, and many are people of color. They tend to be marginalized even within the transgender community," noted Michael Silverman, Executive Director of TLDEF. "The name change process can be challenging for anyone, but for our clients who have faced discrimination within the legal system, there is a real fear of engaging that system, even when the outcome promises to be beneficial."

TLDEF interviews and conducts intake of transgender individuals, and after evaluating their cases, sends the individuals to the firms, where attorneys and paralegals help them move through the process. The program, which began in the summer of 2007, has already assisted over 60 individuals.

"We are currently representing a dozen transgendersed clients, with the help of approximately fifteen lawyers and legal assistants," said Julia Guaragna of Sullivan. "It's been wonderful to help our clients with something so meaningful to their lives."

"The name change is an important step in a person's journey to conform their legal identity to who they are," noted Damion Stodola of Morrison. "The project offers attorneys the opportunity to work closely with clients and witness first hand the difference a few hours can make to someone's life."

"Everything about this service has been so great," said Rhys. "I'm so glad to get this behind me and get on with my life...Having my paperwork changed makes everything so much easier with getting jobs and everything related to that."