

Identity protection

Trans Law Help Wisconsin helps people through legal process

BY VICTORIA DAVIS

OCTOBER 17, 2019

[RSS](#)

TRENDING

Five pizzerias you need to try in Madison, Wisconsin

Pizza for the big game, a date night or a fast lunch — the five spots that took top honors in our 2019 reader poll for favorite pizzeria cover all the bases.

After the purge

With a “Wisconsin is open for business” mantra, former Gov. Scott Walker and legislative Republicans set a course to dramatically diminish the role of science in regulating and protecting Wisconsin’s abundant natural resources.



After interning at the Transgender Law Center in California, attorney Abby Churchill decided that she wanted to “find a way to disseminate that information to the masses.”

Paperwork, notaries and court hearings are just the preliminary steps in the extensive and expensive process of changing a first name. But Madison attorney Abby Churchill, founder and director of Trans Law Help Wisconsin, is working to make name changes — and gender marker changes — simpler for transgender and non-binary individuals. The project also plans to start offering financial help and emotional support in court for those with no one else in their corner.

Madison East teacher pleads not guilty

The U.S. attorney’s office mentioned five incidents involving recording devices in hotel rooms during the Madison East High school teacher’s initial court appearance.

Madison East teacher arrested for attempting to produce child pornography

After a month-long investigation, a Madison East High School business education teacher has been charged with seven counts of attempting to produce child pornography.

Cold comfort

A father-daughter winter camping trip in Rainbow Lake Wilderness gets rid of the clutter of everyday life. Turns out there’s plenty of fun and comfort on a frozen lake.

“For people who change their last name through marriage, the process is a lot easier,” says Churchill. “There also isn’t the same type of stigma.” But, she adds, having to come out or be outed if one’s name on a driver’s license, for instance, does not reflect the gender of the individual, can be dangerous “depending on the circumstances.”

Trans Law Help Wisconsin, which began in 2016 under the wing of Community Justice Inc., is a free legal aid clinic, providing individuals education and assistance in legally changing their first names and gender marker on birth certificates, Social Security cards, marriage licenses, credit cards, driver’s licenses, passports and more. The clinic, which hosts sessions quarterly in January, April, July and October, is staffed by volunteer attorneys and notaries who can assist clients in filling out the proper paperwork.

Trans Law’s next clinic is Saturday, Oct. 19, at CUNA Mutual, 5910 Mineral Point Road, and is open to all ages. It includes a presentation about documents and forms clients might need, the court process, how much everything will cost and the different legal expectations that come with adults and minors changing their first names.

“You can see people’s body language change when they walk out of there,” says Christian Swomley, Churchill’s spouse, who is a transgender man and has volunteered at every session since the clinic began. “It’s like a big sigh of relief for them because it’s one less thing they have to worry about.”

“They take you through the journey virtually and it helps with the anxiety of the unknown for those of us who don’t know what we’re getting ourselves into,” says Jessica, a trans woman and mother of two who used Trans Law to help with her name and gender marker change.

Before starting the clinic, Churchill also helped Swomley with his own name change.

“It took me five years and living in three different states to finally be able to figure out how to navigate through the system,” says Swomley. “The paperwork is very complicated and confusing

and some states even require your fingerprints. The process would have definitely taken a lot longer without Abby's help.”

Churchill interned at the Transgender Law Center in Oakland, California, while in law school. There she worked with transgender clients from all around the country. It was an experience that she says helped stoke a fire.

“I've known for a really long time that I've wanted to work with the LGBTQ community and give back in a useful and tangible way to the community that has given me so much,” says Churchill. “And the internship was a critical moment for me. I knew I didn't want that information to live inside my head and not be shared. I wanted to find a way to disseminate that information to the masses.”

The day after Trump's election, Churchill, who was a year out of law school, posted a shout-out on Facebook stating that she was an attorney living in Madison with the “knowledge and resources” to help anyone who had questions or needed assistance with the name and gender change process.

Right away, Churchill began getting Facebook messages and calls with questions from individuals all over the country. She says she was “overwhelmed, but in a good way,” and decided to get together with friends in the Madison area to host a name and gender change clinic that fall. The event had 30 attendees.

“I just took it and ran with it,” says Churchill. “That's when Trans Law Help Wisconsin was born.”

Since 2016, the program has hosted roughly 10 clinics. Now, Trans Law is looking to start a financial assistance program, which will provide funds for transgender individuals who are unable to pay the expensive legal fees, and an attorney referral network, where Trans Law will partner with LGBTQ-friendly attorneys throughout Wisconsin who can be available to trans clients who live outside of Madison.

Churchill is also working to start a program where volunteers would accompany clients to court to provide emotional support.

“It’s scary going to court and it’s not a great experience whether you’re in trouble or not,” says Swomley. “I was fortunate enough to have Abby and a friend there to support me and that’s not something that everyone has.”

Jessica, who has promoted Trans Law to friends from Madison Area Transgender Association and the Trans Association in Wausau, adds, “So many of us have anxiety and you don’t want to spill our guts alone to someone who is, for all intents and purposes, questioning your gender identity.”

The main focus of the clinic is to “make sure that trans and non-binary folks have the resources they need,” says Churchill. But, she adds, “If we also, by virtue of providing that, do a little advocacy and generate awareness around the issue, that would be a great benefit.”

LGBT



RSS

COMMENTS

Type subject here...

RELATED

New life for troubled club

After stories of discrimination and harassment surfaced at Plan B, the club has closed down. Now founder Rico Sabatini is back in, and the club is reopening as Prism on March 1.

FEB 28, 2019

VANESSA TORTOLANO

Before Stonewall

The Stonewall riots turn 50 this year. But gay liberation was in play years before — even in Wisconsin — as a new book by Dick Wagner chronicles.

JUN 20, 2019

MINERAL POINT LIBRARY ARCHIVES,
R. RICHARD WAGNER COLLECTION

The rookie

The Madison Gay Hockey Association is known world-wide for being inclusive of everyone. This November, its first deaf player took the ice.

NOV 21, 2019

NEWS

News
Cover Stories
Snapshot
Madweek

OPINION

Opinion
Citizen Dave
Savage Love
Cartoons
Feedback

FOOD & DRINK

Reviews
Beer
Food for Thought
Food News
Isthmus Dining
Behind the Brews
Car to Table
Restaurant Directory

A & E

Visual Arts
Books
Comedy
Emphasis
Stage

MUSIC

Music Calendar
Isthmus Live Sessions
Vinyl Cave
Picks Playlists

SCREENS

Movies
TV & Video
Games

EVENTS

Calendar
Isthmus Picks
Isthmus Events
Photo Galleries



