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Transgender advocate honored

LAWYER WINS PRIZE FOR TIRELESS WORK `AGAINST THE ODDS'

By Jessie Mangaliman

Mercury News

A Bay Area lawyer well-known for his work in advancing the rights of transgender people will receive today a \$100,000 Ford Foundation award, a national honor given yearly to community leaders ``working against great odds to make a difference."

Shannon Minter, legal director of the National Center for Lesbian Rights (NCLR) in San Francisco and one of the lead attorneys in the controversial gay marriage litigation, is one of 17 in the United States who will receive the Leadership for a Changing World award. The program is administered through the Advocacy Institute, a Washington, D.C., social justice training group.

``It's a wonderful, great honor," said Minter, 44, a transgender man credited with laying the legal groundwork for many state and local laws that prohibit discrimination against transgender men and women in health care and employment. Minter has handled many legal cases of transgender people and their families in his work with NCLR.

He has worked on court cases involving parental rights of gay and lesbian parents. He's now working on the appeal of a transgender female who was fired from her Salt Lake City job as a bus driver because of her gender change.

``It would be very nice if it we got to a point where it was no particular interest to anyone whether you're transgender or gay," said Minter. ``But unfortunately we're not there yet. There's tremendous struggle for social and legal acceptance. It's a private fact that right now has tremendous public consequences."

The country's leading scholars and legal experts on gay, lesbian and transgender issues credit the soft-spoken Minter for his tireless ground-breaking work.

``If you look at Shannon's history of being open about being a transsexual, and imagining the barriers that one faces with that, he's been a person who's been able to bridge multiple communities," said Laura Chambers, vice president of the Advocacy Institute. ``He's been fearless about it."

Raised in East Texas, Minter was born a female Shannon. He didn't change his name when he completed sex reassignment surgery.

In high school, Minter said, he ``had some vague idea" that he was born to the wrong gender.

In a 2002 speech Minter said, ``Whatever theories or philosophies any of us may have about gender or about child development, the reality is that, for whatever reason, there are children born into this world who have a very deep-seated internal conviction that their gender is different than the one assigned to them at birth."

Bearded and self-deprecating about his thinning hair, Minter could have been describing himself and the difficult time he endured coping with transsexuality.

`Feeling different'

``Like so many transgender people, I grew up feeling different," he said, ``feeling something being wrong."

At first he identified as a lesbian, first in high school, and later at University of Texas in Austin and during law school at Cornell University.

While in law school, he interned at NCLR and later worked on starting a program to provide legal assistance to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender youth who have been forcibly hospitalized to change their gender identity.

He became friends with Dylan Scholinski, a Washington, D.C., writer and artist who was hospitalized for years for ``being too masculine."

Scholinski, who was born Daphne, said Minter ``was an inspiration" to him and other transgenders around the country.

In 1992, in his last year of law school, Minter began to think about and confront transsexuality: his own.

``It was a battle, a lot of internalized feelings," said Minter, who at that time was welcomed in the lesbian community.

In 1996, he began the long transition from female to male with hormone therapy. He completed sex assignment surgery in 2000 and a year later, married.

`Comfortable,' at last

``Without a doubt, it was, along with getting married, the most wonderful experience I've ever had," Minter said. ``For the first time in my whole life I began to feel comfortable with my physical body. That's pretty powerful."

Minter, who speaks with a subtle Texas drawl, has ``an uncanny ability" to engage people, his close friends say.

Helen Carroll, coordinator of an NCLR project on homophobia in sports, said Minter ``brought transgender into the conversation in a thoughtful and very understanding way."

Minter's folksy way of blending local grass-roots advocacy with his national leadership is ``designed to change the world," said Liz Seaton, legal director of the Human Rights Campaign, a national gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender advocacy group.