**At the end of his rope, Kevin Swartz was reborn as Ashley**

Two decades before there was Caitlyn Jenner, a Nebraska farmer made a similar journey

By Erin Grace / World-Herald staff writer

Sunday, November 1, 2015

<http://dataomaha.com/bigstory/columnists/at-the-end-of-his-rope-kevin-swartz-was-reborn-as-ashley>

MALMO, Neb. — The farmer slides open the big green metal doors of this machine shed on a farm 50 miles west of Omaha.

Here is a 1957 John Deere tractor, the oldest the farmer ever bought.

Here is a 2014 John Deere combine that costs 10 times as much as a new car.

And here is the spot, right here, where the farmer once sized up the rafters and a bleak future. Here is where the farmer planned to end it all: a life straddling two irreconcilable selves — male in a physical sense, female in every other way.

This lifelong struggle had felt hopeless. The farmer’s wife had left and taken the kids. The farmer was more alone than ever.

So the farmer had searched for a rope.

Improbably, in this cavernous, tool-stocked shed, the farmer couldn’t find one.

And this bought enough time for doubt — for the farmer to reconsider the impact of a suicide on two young children.

At that moment, the farmer had stopped looking for an end.

And started looking for a beginning.

So the farmer changed one of the most essential characteristics of being a person — his apparent gender. He altered his name, his body and the rest of his outward life to match a femaleness he believed was rooted inside.

Doing this upended his life and the lives of those he loved. It has affected his wife, his son and daughter and his father and brother, who share their farming business.

And the transformation has played out in public in their close-knit rural community where everyone knows everyone.

This was no famous former Olympian gracing a Vanity Fair cover in a more tolerant age.

Caitlyn Jenner’s splashy, glamorous entree into a new gender earlier this year might make the farmer’s leap seem easy.

One day you’re famous Bruce. The next you’re ageless Caitlyn. You’ve got a reality show. ESPN is giving you the Arthur Ashe Courage Award.

Yet even fame and fortune didn’t spare Jenner from despair and a difficult journey. As she told writer Buzz Bissinger this year: “The uncomfortableness of being me never leaves all day long.”

Consider, then, what the Malmo farmer faced in 1995.

For starters, it’s unlikely any of Malmo’s 100 residents then would have flown the rainbow flag. No one could have imagined gay marriage or said those words with a straight face. And the idea of being transgender was even less accepted.

Just two years earlier, in another Nebraska town, a young woman named Teena Brandon who presented herself as a man had been raped and murdered.

Sometimes it was dangerous to be transgender. More often, it was a joke. Popular culture at the time played being transgender for laughs.

Back then, the farmer was known as Kevin Swartz, a round-faced, Wranglers-wearing married father. Kevin was the fifth generation of his family to turn earth in Saunders County. He, his wife and children were named Farm Family of the Year in 1994 by the Cedar Bluffs Co-op. He served on the Malmo Volunteer Fire Department.

But here’s what no one knew: Kevin liked to wear his wife’s lingerie under his Wranglers. He also liked to try on her clothes. When she found out, Tami said, she didn’t know what to do except stick with her husband. He asked her to buy him women’s shoes, size 11, and dresses. She cringed but went along. She wanted to be understanding, telling him they’d get through this.

As time passed and their two children, Brandon and Alyssa, were born, she became less and less sure.

Tami’s stomach turned when she washed his lingerie. She went with him to see various counselors, including those who specialize in gender dysphoria, which is the medical term for those who feel they are a different gender than their body shows. She took the kids and moved out. She brought the kids and moved back.

Then Kevin asked Tami for more: A weekend in Omaha where he could freely and anonymously be a woman in public — something he could never do in the fishbowl of a small town.

She refused.

“That’s not a marriage,” she told him. “If you do that, you’re cheating on me. With yourself.”

He said he couldn’t live another way. She said she couldn’t live like this. So in 1995, she left for good, moving to Wahoo.

The Farm Family of the Year unraveled.

Kevin couldn’t sleep. He would flop onto his kids’ empty beds and weep. He would get the shakes. One time he shook so badly he dropped a water glass, and it broke. He stared at the glass shards, contemplating suicide.

Alone with these thoughts, Kevin reflected on why he was the way he was.

Some people had speculated it had something to do with the untimely death of his mother in 1970, when he was 8. Her clothing got caught in farm machinery, killing her. He remembered the flashing lights of a rescue squad. He remembered her funeral.

But Kevin’s earliest memories, even before his mother’s death, involved feeling different — feeling female “to my bones.”

That feeling never left.

Because he hated taking his shirt off in public, he never really learned to swim.

Because he hated feeling like he wasn’t being true to himself, he mostly slept through high school in the late 1970s at Wahoo Bishop Neumann. Friends called him “Sleepy.”

Because he needed a distraction, he threw himself into work in the 1980s with the family farming business.

Because he hated feeling like work wasn’t enough, he drank. Once he woke up in a ditch after driving his truck off the road.

Because he hated feeling alone, he married Tami in 1988. But his loneliness didn’t go away.

After Tami and the kids left, Kevin couldn’t think straight. Once, while driving a load of cattle home from Columbus late one night, he felt his hands and feet grow numb. He couldn’t feel the steering wheel or accelerator. Kevin got home safely but was scared to death.

He later learned he’d had an anxiety attack, and he went on anti-anxiety and antidepressant medication.

His dad got mad when he heard about the women’s clothes and said: Get that out of here. Pull yourself up!

His sister in North Carolina offered a way out for everyone, including their parents. She said: Come here. Start over.

Kevin did start over. But not in North Carolina.

She started over right in Malmo, right on the family farm, right where she was born.

Her reset began that day in the barn when she chose to live instead of die. And if she was going to live, for her children and for herself, then she was no longer going to live as male Kevin. She would live as the person she believed she was: a woman.

The farmer did not immediately know how to change. She did not immediately feel transformed on the outside.

She did, however, feel different on the inside.

Kevin took tentative steps, such as attending a transgender support group in Omaha. The first time, Kevin attended as male Kevin. The second time, female Kevin first stopped at a friend’s, changed into women’s clothing and put on makeup. And called herself Ashley.

She started living as a woman in January 1996. That April, she officially changed her name to Ashley. She began hormone therapy and electrolysis. She started growing her hair. She learned how to do her own makeup.

And she made plans to have gender reassignment surgery. She met with her bankers.

She asked one about perhaps delaying a farm loan payment so she could pay the $11,000 surgery tab. He said sure — though the crop was good enough it wasn’t necessary.

She asked the other banker, Stuart Krejci at FirstBank of Nebraska in Wahoo, if they’d still conduct business together.

Krejci told her it didn’t matter what her name was or who she decided to be.

Farming is a business, he said, and the long-standing relationship with the bank is based on the farm’s production.

“She’s a good farmer,” Krejci would say later. “Always has been. Has a good family, all good farmers. That has never changed.”

Encouraged, Ashley slowly started coming out to everyone else.

Not everyone took the news as gently as the banks.

Ashley’s father was not thrilled. The Malmo Volunteer Fire Department chief told Ashley he didn’t want to talk about this. A fellow firefighter flat-out said: I don’t think I could go into a burning building with you.

And Tami, his ex-wife, was flustered. What would this mean for the kids? How would she explain it?

Still, Ashley pressed forward. She closed out 1996 by going to Neenah, Wisconsin, for the surgery.

Ashley returned to Malmo believing this: Gender isn’t genitals or a name or bedazzled jeans or a purple manicure. She believed that gender is how you think and how you feel. But the outer changes helped her feel more at home with the female identity she had finally embraced.

“What did it feel like?” she said. “It was a feeling of coming home when you’ve been gone for a while. Comfort.”

She finally felt free.

One morning, this crystallized for her. Ashley woke early to feed the cattle and wasn’t eager to tramp through the wet grass. But as she looked down, she saw dew on the grass and rainbows in the tiny drops of dew. She wept at the beauty. Life now was so, so beautiful.

This doesn’t mean that life was easy. Ashley expected to feel uncomfortable in public. Still, the discomfort of others really rattled her. She felt gawked at and gossiped about. Strangers drove by the farm, staring. People prank called. Ashley got hate mail that said: Get out. When she first took her kids to the Saunders County Fair as Ashley, she felt like an animal on exhibit.

She considered leaving, but this was her home and livelihood. Why should she go?

The change was hard on her family. Ashley introduced her new self to the kids, who were then 5 and 3.

The next day, Brandon called to ask: Does this mean I don’t have a dad anymore?

Ashley stressed she would always be in their lives. Sometimes, this wasn’t comfortable. Tami said when Ashley showed up at Brandon’s kindergarten graduation at St. Wenceslaus Grade School in Wahoo, all eyes turned toward her.

Tami made a decision: They would leave Wahoo for Omaha. She wanted to shield her children.

They came up with a way to refer to Ashley, who had told Brandon and Alyssa they could call her whatever they wanted.

They settled on “Aunt Ashley.”

It wasn’t a perfect solution. For years, Tami said, perfunctory forms at school and the doctor’s office tripped her up.

“Who’s Ashley?” a nurse would say about the name on the kids’ health insurance.

Tami lamented a push today to embrace people who are transgender without considering how their family members, particularly children, will fare. She said the public’s opinion of Caitlyn Jenner might be different if Jenner still had young children.

The Swartz children are now 25 and 22.

Alyssa, who was too young to really remember Ashley when she went by Kevin, said she feels she missed out on having a father. Still, she said she is very close to the parent she calls “Ashley.” She said she is grateful for the time they spend together now.

Brandon, a father himself, declined an interview. But according to Ashley, they remain connected. Recently he, his toddler daughter and Ashley met for dinner.

“They both say they love Ashley,” Tami said of her children. “And I do, too. I care about Ashley. Sometimes I have to joke ‘I have an ex-wife.’ (People say) ‘What do you mean by that?’ Now I can say ‘You heard about Bruce Jenner?’ ”

Ashley shares a 2,000-acre corn and soybean operation around Malmo with her father and brother. She said all three work well together, but they never talk about how Kevin became Ashley.

Ashley said her father never has been very expressive. She has yearned for an open discussion and even wrote him a letter once about that, to no avail. Still, her father seems to have accepted who she is. Sometimes he slips and uses the wrong pronoun — “he” instead of “she.” Mostly, though, he calls her Ashley.

On a recent day on the farm, the pair got along easily. He met her on a hill of soybeans, and they talked about why the parked combine had stopped working and how much easier those big machines were to fix back in the old days before they were computerized. They laughed as they watched Ashley’s brother in another combine mow down rows of beans.

Ashley’s personal life is full of friends but no current love interest. She started out dating women, then dated men and even was engaged to a man at one point.

Finding a church has been a challenge. Ashley left the Catholic Church in which she was raised and church-hopped for years. She spent a year as a Jehovah’s Witness. She attended churches in Lincoln and Omaha, landing for a while at a west Omaha evangelical megachurch, whose leaders urged her to change back to being a man — something Ashley considered. She even went home, dug through her closet and found a suit she’d worn as a man. She tried it on and hated it. The thought of going back to “Kevin” made her weep.

So she left that church and continues to search. Her faith in God is strong. She prays a lot. Most of her prayers these days are for “a right heart.” She doesn’t want to be angry.

Now 53, Ashley said she wishes her path would have been more straightforward. But she wouldn’t go back and change anything. She also is starting to take a more public role as a transgender person. She had considered being part of a World-Herald story 10 years ago but backed out because her children then were adolescents and she didn’t want to put them through the exposure.

Now that they are grown, Ashley has signed on to projects like one the American Civil Liberties Union of Nebraska has done called Transgender Voices. These are video clip introductions, posted on the ACLU’s website, that show a range of transgender Nebraskans. She has spoken to groups, including one called Caring Catholic Families that provides support and resources for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Catholics and their friends and families.

She was even featured in a song written about her and performed by the River City Mixed Chorus at the Orpheum Theater. When Ashley was introduced on stage, the Omaha audience gave her a standing ovation.

“I want people to know,” she said, “I’m everyday people.”

Over time, Ashley has felt accepted.

She is so everyday at home in Malmo and Wahoo that friends there shrug.

“It’s kind of old news here,” said Krejci, Ashley’s longtime banker. He added: “You have to hand it to her. It did take a lot of courage 20 years ago.”

Wearing an old pink hoodie and worn, rhinestone-studded blue jeans, Ashley climbed into her 18-wheeler on a recent, crisp fall day.

She drove a load of soybeans off the farm and into town. She drove past the Saunders County Courthouse, where nearly 20 years ago she changed her name. She drove to a grain elevator in Wahoo, where she made small talk with the workers at the weigh station. Then she returned to the field and her newly repaired combine.

The farmer slid into the driver’s seat, grabbed the lever and began the old ritual. Harvest.

From her perch, the farmer could see the infinite expanse of a Nebraska horizon — a clear blue sky and rows and rows of tawny soybeans. As she rolled over the rows, the combine stripped the soybean pods off their waist-high stalks and shelled them. Thousands of small golden round beans rained into the compartment.

It will be a good-enough crop, the farmer thinks, especially for a year that started off too wet.

Her own personal journey had its stormy days, too. But two decades after she stood in that metal barn looking for a rope, the farmer is at peace.

And that is her most important harvest.

Contact the writer: erin.grace@owh.com, 402-444-1136, twitter.com/ErinGraceOWH