

CHRISTINE JORGENSEN

Transsexual Activist and International Spokesperson

(1926-1989)



Bronx-born Army veteran George Jorgensen struggled for years “feeling like a woman trapped in a man’s body.” He resolved to begin his transition by taking the female hormone ethinyl estradiol, and in early 1952 traveled to Copenhagen to quietly pursue sex-reassignment. But any hopes for anonymity were shattered when the letter he wrote to his parents was leaked to the press. On December 1, 1952 the New York *Daily News* carried the front-page story (“Ex-GI Becomes Blonde Beauty”) of his “sex change” in Denmark. By the time Jorgensen – who took the name Christine – returned to New York in February 1953, she had become an international superstar. Knowing that her privacy was shattered, she decided to seize control of what would become one of the most celebrated lives of the 20th-century. No longer able to pursue her career as a photographer, she enjoyed immediate success as a nightclub singer, dancer, and storyteller who titillated audiences and dazzled the paparazzi. By the mid-1960s, her commercial success had largely disappeared and she became a public spokesperson for those with gender dysphoria and the largely misunderstood phenomenon of Transsexuality. In her 1967 book, *Christine Jorgensen: A Personal Biography*, she proffered “The answer to the problem must not lie in sleeping pills and suicides that look like accidents, or in jail sentences, but rather in life and the freedom to live it.” Charismatic and photogenic, and known for her directness and polished wit, she was featured on numerous television talk shows and toured extensively on the college lecture circuit. By the early 1980s, Jorgensen had retired from public life in Laguna Beach, California. She died of bladder and lung cancer in 1989 at the age of 62. The woman who claimed that she “didn’t start the Sexual Revolution but gave it a swift kick in the pants” was gone – but the battle for Transsexual Rights had only just begun.

Lesson Plan

Level 1: Contributions Approach

1. Activate prior experience: What is the relationship between Christine Jorgensen and George Jorgensen? Read the biographical information.
2. Group Discussion: Examine how Jorgensen provided a public eye to becoming a transsexual.
3. Read the following background information at http://library.transgenderzone.com/?page_id=2160

Level 2: Additive Approach

1. Examining the role of transgendered individuals, like Jorgensen, in our human development courses or social work courses enables learners to gain knowledge about the challenges and opportunities facing these individuals. Connect with other transgendered individuals portrayed in the Legacy Project at <http://legacyprojectchicago.org/Transgender.html>
2. Discuss what you have learned about their challenges and personal decision to change their own identity.

Level 3: Transformational Approach

1. View the following on Christine Jorgensen’s passage:
 - a. Christine Jorgensen on Joe Pyne 1966 or 1967 at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fyh8BxPxtnw>
 - b. Christine Jorgensen Reveals at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SrEdgs6xKeE&feature=related>
 - c. Christine Jorgensen - Woman of the Year at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T6PwpfdAXMM&feature=related>
2. How did our society change its impression of Jorgensen throughout the years?

Level 4: Social Action Approach

1. Examine the obstacles that are confronted by an individual who is questioning his/her identity. View the following clip: http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xd416_christine-jorgensen-story-1_shortfilms
2. Incorporating your own understanding of Christine Jorgensen, how would you advocate for transgendered individuals in a modern version of a movie? Write your own script.