

WISCONSIN WOMEN MAKING HISTORY

THEIR STORIES OUR LEGACY

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SHERI SWOKOWSKI

1950

City: DeForest, Manitowoc

County: Dane, Manitowoc

Transgender advocate Sheri Swokowski, a former colonel in the U.S. Army, has worked to end discrimination based on gender identity or sexual orientation.

Although she was assigned male when she was born in Manitowoc, WI, in 1950, Sheri Swokowski felt “different” as a young child, but she “just didn’t know what it was called.” It was taboo in the 1950s and 1960s to have a transitional identity, so she tried to live as a man for a long time. Throughout her military career, which included service as an infantry officer, teaching in the Army Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (ROTC) at UW-Stevens Point, and working for the Wisconsin Army National Guard, Swokowski fought the urge to live life as a woman. She finally started her gender transition after retiring from the military in 2006. She began teaching in the US Army Force Management School in Fort Belvoir, Virginia, and found a community of trans women in the Washington, DC, area. She came out to her family and then to some of her mentors in the military, who seemed to be mostly supportive.

Swokowski had gender reassignment surgery in 2007. When she tried to return to work, she was let go because they had “found a replacement.” She went on to help then-Representative Tammy Baldwin try to pass the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA), which would ban employment discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. ENDA passed in the US Senate in 2013, but failed to pass the House of Representatives. Swokowski’s advocacy for trans people helped bring an end to the ban on transgender members of the military in June 2016.

As a retired US Army colonel, Swokowski is the highest-ranking out transgender individual in the country. She was also the first individual to have her gender changed on her military service record without needing a lawyer. In June 2015, she wore an Army infantry uniform at the Pentagon, the first woman to legitimately do so since it was not until 2016 that women were officially allowed in combat positions. Swokowski served on the board of directors for Fair Wisconsin 2013-2015. In 2015 she joined the board of directors for ACLU of WI. In 2020, at 70 years old, she earned her PhD in leadership for the application of learning and service from Cardinal Stritch University. Swokowski continues her advocacy efforts at both the state and the national level.

To learn more, visit womeninwisconsin.org/profile/sheri-swokowski