



# *The* **BUTTERFLY** **EFFECT**

Robert Lancaster graduated with a Bachelor of Science in 1973. An award-winning athlete and captain of the men's golf team, Lancaster was destined for medical school. Nearly 45 years later, **Bobbi Lancaster '73, '78, '80** reflects on her personal journey as a transgender pioneer.

**By Allyson Rowley**

She was born Robert Lancaster, the eldest of four children, in a farming community in southwestern Ontario. She played sports, took piano lessons, had a paper route, collected bugs. “I loved insects, especially butterflies. I was fascinated by the metamorphosis of the chrysalis,” she recalls. Sometimes, she and her best friend would play dress-up. “I was brimming with self-confidence. It was a magical time.”

Then, everything changed. She started to hear words like “fag,” “weirdo,” “pervert.” She was afraid. Raised in the Catholic faith, she went to confession. “I feel like I’m a girl,” she whispered. “I desperately want to be a girl.” She learned she was not a girl – she was a sinner. Crushed, she lost her confidence and decided to hide who she was.

For more than 40 years, she hid.

“I must have delivered close to 1,000 babies,” says **Bobbi Lancaster ’73, ’78, ’80** who graduated as Robert Lancaster in 1978 with an MD from McMaster. “And every time, we would take a quick look between their legs and pronounce: ‘It’s a boy!’ Or: ‘It’s a girl!’”

Lancaster explains that we now know there’s a location in the brain for gender identity – a person’s individual experience of gender – separate from sexual orientation and not always the same as one’s physical sex. “The most important thing,” says Lancaster, “is who does your brain say you are?”

A scholarship recipient, she enrolled at McMaster for a Bachelor of Science in 1969. Lancaster enjoyed campus life, found a girlfriend, and was captain of the men’s golf team. After graduating, she thought of becoming an entomologist – but there was this brand new medical school. “That got me excited.” Some of her profs were luminaries like **Fraser Mustard ’90** (hon.) and **David Sackett ’09** (hon.). Her chief resident was **Paul O’Byrne ’82**.

On her own, Lancaster would search scientific journals, desperate for information on her situation. She’d locate a paper in the catalogue and head to the stacks to find the journal. And time after time, the article would be torn out. “My whole life felt like cloak and dagger.”

Eventually, her confidence hit rock bottom and she dropped out of med school. She drove a taxi, sold clothes, worked in a golf shop. Ronald McAuley, one of Lancaster’s professors, would call every six months or so. After two years, Lancaster called back. “He didn’t give up on me,” Lancaster says of McAuley, a physician who was instrumental in the development of family medicine at McMaster. “So many people influenced me at Mac.”

Lancaster completed her medical training in 1980 and set up a thriving family practice in Hamilton, now married to her college sweetheart. Soon, they were raising three children, one biological and two adopted. In 1991, they moved to Arizona, where Lancaster set up another practice. But she and her wife parted ways several years later. In 1999, Lancaster married Lucy, the love of her life.

At 49, Lancaster had a happy marriage, a beautiful home, and a lucrative career. But she was “completely lost.” Depression was her constant companion. Driving home from work, she would pull over by the side of the road to weep.

It took a near-suicide attempt and a stroke for Bobbi to finally emerge from her chrysalis. In 2005, she reached out



Joanne West Photography

for counselling and other support, and she started taking hormones. In 2010, just before her 60th birthday, she had her surgery. Her marriage survived, but her employment did not. Only one patient wanted to quit, but her employers couldn’t accept the change from Dr. Bob to Dr. Bobbi.

Lancaster had a lot of free time now, so she took up golfing seriously. To compensate for her size and strength, she chose to compete with much younger women. She started to win tournaments. The media came calling – everyone from the *Arizona Republic* to *Good Morning America* to *Sports Illustrated* has interviewed her.

The light bulb really went on, though, when she helped ensure that golf associations changed their policies to include transgender athletes. “I’m an agent of change,” Lancaster realized. “I saw this with a whole new set of eyes.” She still maintains a small medical practice, but devotes much of her time to public speaking and volunteering for the Human Rights Campaign (HRC). In 2015, she was honoured with the Individual Equality Award from their Arizona branch, and in 2016 she was elected to the HRC Foundation’s national board.

Her metamorphosis hasn’t been easy – not by a long shot. Lancaster sums it up succinctly: “The medical part was easy. The social transition was gut-wrenching.” But in the end, not one friend abandoned her.

What would she say to that scared kid at confession? “Yes, you’re different, but that is OK. Everyone is a little different,” says Lancaster. “Now, go and do great things. The sky’s the limit. Your friends will be inspired – and you will change them, too.” ■