



# Sea change

Local maritime and sailing identity Yvette Wijnen was born male but admits that gender had been an issue for her since the age of 12 - until she decided to transition.

Story by Rosamund Burton

I've arranged to meet Yvette Wijnen at Church Point, and she's unmissable. Six-foot four and long-legged in her short summer dress, wearing pink lipstick and with a pink flower in her shoulder-length wavy blonde hair. On April 7, 2018 Yvette held a party for a group of close friends - she 'came out' telling them she was transitioning from man to woman.

"It was scary coming out, but that was the first day I lived as myself, and dressed as a woman."

She had been on hormones for six months prior, to prohibit facial hair growth and grow her breasts and in August she went to Thailand to undergo genital surgery.

"It's an expensive procedure," she tells me, as she steers her red painted electric dinghy across Pittwater. "Last year I worked every job I could get to earn the money to pay for it."

Yvette, now aged 48, admits that her gender had been an issue for her since she was 12 years old.

"For years on and off I dressed as a woman at home, then I'd think I shouldn't be doing this and throw the whole wardrobe out, before several years later starting again, and I felt a huge guilt pretending to be a woman. Last year I realised I had to address this,

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and saw a psychiatrist who told me I had gender dysphoria - the condition of feeling emotionally and psychologically my gender is the opposite to my biological sex."

Yvette pulls up alongside the impressive 71-foot red multi-hulled proa - a multihull sailing boat with one hull larger than the other - moored to the north-west of Scotland Island, which she built 10 years ago. Sitting on the deck she tells me more about her extraordinary life.

Born in the Netherlands, and living near a lake, Yvette, then known as Ini, became interested in sailing boats at the age of five. Having trained in engineering, he began building boats in his early 20s, constructing a 40-foot proa, before he was conscripted for national service. He volunteered to serve as a United Nations peacekeeper in former Yugoslavia, and worked as a communication technician during the Yugoslav Wars.

"After that nothing seemed dangerous," says Yvette.

Aged 23, Ini left the Netherlands, single-handedly sailing the proa westwards with no fixed destination. He met an Australian woman in Portugal, who was sailing with her father. In their separate boats, they crossed the Atlantic and got engaged when they were

reunited in the Caribbean. Ini continued his solo sail, going through the Panama, across the Pacific and arriving in Coffs Harbour in July 1995.

The couple married and had two children, a daughter and a son, and Ini built them a 55-foot steel boat on which they lived, until he and his wife separated. From then on Ini lived with his young son on the boat, travelling up and down the east coast between Cairns and Hobart for his work, which was mostly boat maintenance and refits. When his son was six, they sailed with two other people across the Pacific, delivering a yacht from Melbourne to San Diego. Having gone to 10 different primary schools, his son wanted to go to only one high school. That was 10 years ago, and they had recently come to Pittwater, so he went to Pittwater High.

"For a period, we lived on the boat, and I used to drive the ferry. The ferry route went past the boat, so I'd pick him up from here for school."

Yvette and her son, who is now 20, and doing a shipwright's apprenticeship, are living at McCarrs Creek with Yvette's ex-partner. They broke up due to Yvette's transition, although remain good friends.

Being a lifelong environmentalist, Yvette runs her Nissan Navara ute



on vegetable oil. This proa, named Gaiasdream, is built of sustainable timber, the engine runs on vegetable oil, cooking is done with ethanol and electricity comes from solar and wind.

"And the dinghy is the only electric commuter boat on Pittwater," she says. "I recharge the batteries every night by plugging an extension lead into the dinghy's built-in battery charger."

Yvette has specialised in making boats fossil fuel-free, working for Greenpeace and also Australian sailor and climate action advocate, Lisa Blair, who sailed solo around Antarctica in 2017.

When she came out, she says, mostly locals were incredibly supportive, and went out of their way to make her feel at ease, although she adds some people, particularly men, found it hard to deal with the transition, because they couldn't understand why she wanted to do this.

"My parents found it difficult, especially initially, but now my dad's happy he's finally got a daughter, and my mum's really proud."

Yvette, who holds Australian permanent residency, not citizenship, returned to Holland to get her documents updated.

"It's only my birth certificate that has my old name and gender, as well as the new information. My passport states I'm female. And the Dutch authorities, realising how special this new passport was to me, made an exception and allowed me to smile for the photograph."

As a member of Trans Pride Australia, a support group for trans and gender diverse people, Yvette was on the Trans Pride float at the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras in March this year.

"I'm not a natural dancer, but I learnt the dance routine, and had so much fun. Initially, it was confronting, because there were thousands of people watching, and I was wearing a bikini, but it was an amazing night. I loved it."

She meets with members of the Trans Pride group occasionally, and they talk about the issues they face. One of the reasons she agreed to be interviewed for *Pittwater Life* is that she knows someone else in the area who has just come out.

"I want people to be more aware that there are trans people here, and that they're lovely people, not scary, and need a bit of support."

Less than a year since her operation Yvette is still very much in a transition

phase of her life. She has gone from being a man with little to no concern for how he looked to what she describes as "a real 'girly' girl".

Physically, she's lost some of her strength, and found that knots she tied on the boat before the operation she now can't undo. Psychologically, she's also changed,

"I definitely take things more personally."

Having done close to 100,000 offshore miles, and for years getting scratched and scraped doing boat maintenance and repairs, she's unsure if she'll remain in the male-dominated marine industry.

"Now, I'm less interested in getting my hands dirty, I want to look pretty. I super care how I look, whereas before I didn't care."

As we motor in the dinghy back to Church Point I have only admiration for the path that Yvette has chosen. It isn't easy for her, or her close family and friends, but she has followed the course she knew she needed to take.

"I wish I was born a woman," she says with a smile, "but I love being a transwoman."



CLOCKWISE FROM OPPOSITE: Yvette Wijnen aboard her pride and joy, the fully sustainable 71-foot multi-hulled proa 'Gaiasdream' which she built 10 years ago; at the wheel moored off Scotland Island; Yvette was born Ini before transitioning last year; Yvette has always held an interest in environmentalism and runs her ute on vegetable oil; she now says she is less interested in getting her hands dirty and cares more about her looks; the former Ini.

