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Barbra Siperstein, Crusader for Transgender Rights, Dies at 76

By **Sam Roberts**

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Barbra Siperstein, a crusader for transgender rights, died on Sunday, two days after a law bearing her name went into effect granting New Jerseyans the right to amend the gender on their birth certificates without proof of surgery. She was 76.

Dorothy Crouch, her partner, said Ms. Siperstein (pronounced SIP-er-steen) died of cancer in a hospital in New Brunswick, N.J.

According to the Transgender Law Center, New Jersey is among a handful of states, including California and Oregon, that no longer require a court order, a doctor's letter or other medical evidence to alter a birth certificate.

The New Jersey measure, called the Babs Siperstein Law, had been passed twice before by the Legislature but vetoed by the governor at the time, Chris Christie, a Republican. It went into effect on Feb. 1.

The law eliminates the burdensome requirement that people provide proof of surgery from a medical professional before they can change the gender category on their birth certificates. They can now legally attest for themselves (or parents for their children) that they are male, female or "undesigned/nonbinary."

Garden State Equality, which calls itself New Jersey's largest LGBT organization, said the law makes it easier for transgender, nonbinary and intersex people to gain access to identity documents "that accurately reflect the gender they live everyday, which is not necessarily the gender they were assigned at birth."

"We all use identity documents for important tasks, such as enrolling ourselves or our children in school and college, applying for a job, opening a bank account, and applying for an apartment or mortgage," the group said on its website, adding:

"Having documentation that matches one's gender is vitally important, as mismatches between a person's gender identity and their identity documents can and does result in discrimination and harassment."

Gov. Philip D. Murphy, a Democrat, signed the legislation last year. In a statement after her death, he said Ms. Siperstein “was never shy to push us to open our hearts and minds, and to move our thinking ever forward.”

Ms. Siperstein, an Army veteran who was married with children, began her public campaign for gender equality after her wife died in 2001.

Cultivating politicians from both parties, Ms. Siperstein was the first transgender member of the executive committee of the Democratic National Committee, serving from 2011 to 2017. She helped persuade the party to include gender identity as a category of protected rights. In 2016, she was a delegate for Hillary Clinton at the Democratic National Convention.

Ms. Siperstein also lobbied against so-called conversion therapy to change sexual orientation or gender identity, a treatment discredited by the medical establishment, and in favor of health care programs tailored for transgender people.

Christian Fuscarino, executive director of Garden State Equality, described Ms. Siperstein as “an architect of our movement, pioneering critical civil rights legislation.”

She was born Barry Siperstein on Nov. 20, 1942, in Jersey City to Morris and Mildred (Yanover) Siperstein. Her father was the treasurer of a paint and wallpaper retail chain started by his parents.

Barry earned a bachelor’s degree from Rutgers University and a master’s of business administration in public accounting from Pace University before joining the family business, Siperstein Fords Paint Corp., in Fords, N.J. He later bred race horses as well.

Soon came marriage to Carol Slonk, an elementary-school teacher who joined Siperstein Ford Paint as an administrative assistant. They had three children.

Barbra Siperstein was nearing 50 in the late 1980s when she told Carol Siperstein that she was transgender. Carol was supportive, and the two remained together, keeping Barbra’s orientation a secret at first.

“We kind of lived a double life for many years,” Barbra told The Star-Ledger of Newark in 2012.

Combining initials and first names, the couple invented an alias, which was how she became known, first to family and friends, as Barbra Casbar Siperstein.

She began advocating publicly for transgender rights about the time that Carol died in 2001, at 55.

In an appreciation last year on the website insidernj.com, where Ms. Siperstein was listed first on the LGBTQ Power List, Senator Cory Booker of New Jersey wrote, “Babs Siperstein began her activism at a time when being transgender carried an even greater stigma than it does today.”

Ms. Siperstein suggested that transgender people were sometimes marginalized even among lesbians, gays and bisexuals and their supporters.

“A lot of these gay white men were worried about their own gender identity,” she said. “If gays and lesbians are second-class citizens, what was I as a single transgender person?”

After Carol died, she added, “I kind of used my grief and my anger to change the law.”

In addition to Ms. Crouch, Ms. Siperstein is survived by her daughter, Jana Siperstein-Szucs; two sons, Jeffrey and Jared Siperstein; five grandchildren; and her sister, Sherry Grosky. She lived in Edison, N.J.

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