
APPENDIX B
“IS HE OR ISN'T SHE”
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Photo: Bina & Martine Rothblatt

by Andrew Marton

IS HE OR ISN'T SHE?

**The business world
is a tough place to
survive. It's even
tougher if you're
a transsexual.**

In the clubby world of satellite communications techno-wizards, Martin Rothblatt stood out. For one thing, at six feet tall and 180 pounds, Rothblatt was a formidable physical presence. More than that, his peers thought Rothblatt a visionary, someone who had helped get some of the industry's most inventive projects off the ground. The gregarious Rothblatt was a fixture at communications conferences, chatting up contacts, exchanging cards, and plotting stratospheric innovations.

But beginning in mid-1992, Rothblatt began to withdraw from the business scene. His meeting appearances grew sporadic, then non-existent. The phone calls trickled to a halt. For all intents and purposes, Martin Rothblatt had disappeared.

Raul Rodriguez was intrigued. A partner at the telecommunications law firm of Leventhal Senter & Lerman, Rodriguez had known Rothblatt for years and was perplexed by his disappearance. But he was busy with his legal work and didn't have time to track Rothblatt down.

Then in May of last year, Rothblatt unexpectedly called Rodriguez and asked him to meet for a drink. Rodriguez drove his red Saab convertible to the Rhode Island Avenue offices of WorldSpace, Rothblatt's latest telecommunications venture. Craning his neck to the left and right, he failed to locate his friend. Rodriguez was about to leave when a woman approached his car. Large-boned, with wavy, chestnut-colored hair that came to her shoulders, the woman sat down on the front seat and greeted Rodriguez with a throaty "hello." Rodriguez was mute; his face drained of color. Another look confirmed his suspicions: he was staring at Martin Rothblatt — as a woman.

Martine Rothblatt, as she is now known, may be Washington's only highly visible, white-collar transsexual. In a city where career moves are plotted with military precision, Rothblatt has jeopardized her professional life by obeying her personal desires and changing her sex. "I felt that professionally I had accomplished as much as any individual could have hoped to accomplish, but that I was not being true to my soul," Rothblatt says.

Which is not to say that her career isn't very important to Rothblatt, who in 1993 was inducted into the *World's Who's Who of Women*. Refusing to retreat from the high-flying world of satellite communications, she has transformed herself into a fighter for workplace equality for women. Martine knows the male-dominated business world inside and out. Now she's intent on using her experience to improve the lot of women in that world. Especially women who, like Rothblatt, used to be men.

"Silence is death and visibility is power," Rothblatt proclaims. "And so long as we are invisible, we are subject to more discrimination."



With its stained wood booths and a raw bar brimming with shucked shellfish, Charley's Crab, the Connecticut Avenue restaurant, has all the trappings of a Washington power establishment. Promptly at 5:45 on a blustery March afternoon, Martine Rothblatt breezes into Charley's with the familiarity of a regular. The waiters greet her as she enters, offer her a quiet booth in the back, and bring her an Absolut and cranberry juice. She is an enthusiastic if not dainty devourer of the bar's Buffalo wings. Later she will use — of course — the women's room. Rothblatt feels comfortable at Charley's, and it is here that she starts to tell her story.

Ever since he was a teenager growing up in Los Angeles, Rothblatt felt like a female trapped in a male body. "I felt imprisoned in a male sexual identity that

I didn't choose myself," she explains. "It was like being in a religious cult — and I saw how difficult society makes it to leave that cult."

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Afraid to do anything about his compulsion, Rothblatt channeled his energy into work — and overachieved at a manic pace. He attended the University of California at Los Angeles, excelling in undergraduate and graduate programs in communications, business, and law. (A backpack jaunt across Africa introduced Rothblatt to his first NASA satellite tracking station.) Along the way he got married, fathered a child, and divorced. He tried to keep busy, always busy.

More and more, though, Rothblatt longed to emote like a woman. "Women have a caring in their lifestyle that I found very attractive," Rothblatt explains. "Plus, I identified with female sexuality, the fact that you can smile more as a woman than as a man, and that women have a greater cooperative attitude towards sex, quite unlike the conquest attitude of men." Rothblatt was coming to realize that he didn't want to be a woman so he could have sex with men. He wanted to be a lesbian.

Immediately upon graduating with honors from his combined business and law program, Rothblatt was recruited by Washington's blue-blood law firm Covington & Burling. He soon discovered that billing hours to opponents of the satellite industry clashed with his career plans. So, banking on his expertise in both the regulatory and the technological areas of satellite communications, plus his professorship of telecommunications policy at George Washington University, Rothblatt hung out his own shingle as a communications consultant.

From his consulting group, Orbital Projects, Rothblatt helped develop the first Federal Communications Commission filing and business plan for PanAmSat, the world's first privately owned international satellite system. Rothblatt subsequently worked with a succession of innovative start-ups, including Geostar, where he helped raise \$100 million and hire 100 people, filling four floors of K Street office space. Under Rothblatt's direction, Geostar helped design a satellite tracking service installed on 6,000 trucks.

Rothblatt left Geostar in 1989 to set up another consulting firm, dubbed Marcor, from which he outfitted 1,500 Dallas buses with satellite-controlled receivers which monitored the buses' on-time record and location. Rothblatt then pushed Marcor into a joint venture with Motorola to develop a satellite-controlled, global cellular phone network. Rothblatt himself mapped out the obscure radio frequencies which could carry cellular signals around the world.

In 1990 Rothblatt co-founded his latest start-up, WorldSpace. Its main project, "AfriSpace," involves a \$130 million satellite-controlled radio transmission system; the network sends out 72 channels of radio to all of Africa and the Middle East. "My main goal has always been to put satellites' uses in everyone's hands," says Rothblatt. "I want to ensure that Zimbabwe will get to hear rock and roll."



All the time that Rothblatt was pushing the satellite envelope, of course, he was concealing his nagging secret. While Rothblatt hobnobbed with male colleagues, sharing in their upscale locker-room banter, he was ogling women from a rather different perspective.

"When I looked at a woman, I was just a dyke looking at another woman," she says. And no one knew.

"Martin was the quintessential male," says Cecily Holiday, chief of the FCC's satellite radio branch. "Most men saw him almost as a bit of a womanizer, but it wasn't that at all. Martin really identified with women, but when he was with other men, he was this chameleon, able to exaggerate his male side."

To maintain the facade, Rothblatt compartmentalized his life. During business hours not a hint of his secret sexual identity would show itself. But after hours Martin searched for ways to express his sexuality, in part by donning women's clothing. The walls could

not stand forever. "I was approaching my mid-30s and it was now or never," recalls Rothblatt.

One pillar of support for Rothblatt was his incredibly understanding family: Bina Aspen Rothblatt, his spouse of 12 years, and their four children. Early on, when

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Rothblatt explained his desire to keep separate women's clothes, his family had accepted Martin's choice. The kids were young and open-minded, and crossing from a heterosexual to a lesbian relationship didn't phase Bina. She, like Rothblatt,

doesn't like to categorize relationships; she calls herself a "unisexual" or "multi-sexual" person. (Martine and Bina now call each other "spice," short for spouse and wife.) "I'm very accepting of things, so when Martine told me about what she was feeling, I just said, 'That's fine, it won't be a big difference,'" recalls Bina Rothblatt. "I was looking forward to investigating such a fascinating thing together."

In 1988 Rothblatt began the long, slow process of stripping away his sex. Typical for Rothblatt, who always steeped himself in research on any important topic, he pored over some 50 books and hundreds of articles on transsexuality. He developed his own A-list of surgeons. Then he began the change.

Stage one was a two-year "real-life test," beginning in 1992, incorporating a steady dosage of female hormones and trying to act like a woman. The hormones — the most effective blend is premarin, derived from the urine of a pregnant mare — produce breasts, greater sub-surface fat, diminished muscle mass, and less skin oil than a man normally secretes. What the hormone regimen cannot do is alter the hips, shrink the Adam's apple, or raise a man's voice; male vocal chords are irreversibly developed by adolescence.

The transition from Martin to Martine was a sartorial one as well. Rothblatt began to shed his conventional male shell — an anti-chic combination of polyester suits and horn-rimmed glasses — and adopted European-cut suits and contact lenses. Eventually he discarded the suits altogether in favor of satiny shirts and a pony tail. "Since he had never dressed in that kind of androgynous fashion before, you couldn't help but notice that he was making a statement," says



Wilbur Pritchard, president of W.L. Pritchard & Co. Inc., an engineering firm for small satellite systems.

Bina and other friends supplied Rothblatt with tips on acting like a woman. While men often stride across a room, Bina said, Martine should glide. A work confidant gave advice on posture. "I'd help her with

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her walk and fixing the way she sits so that she wouldn't slouch the way men normally do," says Deborah King, a WorldSpace office manager. Bina helped pick out Martine's wardrobe and hairstyles that flatter her. The two often traded accessories.

After only a year, Rothblatt felt ready to undergo the irreversible

operation known as "neo-colporrhaphy," or "new vagina." The two-and-a-half-hour surgery is the source of numerous misconceptions. Contrary to popular myth, the penis is not cut off. It is instead emptied of its spongy tissue and, like the finger of a rubber glove, turned inside out. The skin of the penis is gently pushed into a cavity formed by separating the lower abdominal muscle fibers, and this inside-out formation becomes the vaginal lining. The scrotum is used to create the frontal lips of the vagina; some of the skin at the base of the inverted penis can be surgically sculpted to look like a clitoris. Enough of the urethra is preserved from the penis to tunnel it under the tissue and place it in the female position.

Since the new vagina is lined with the nerve endings of the penis (while the interior of a woman's vagina normally has minimal nerve endings), a transsexual's vagina is highly sensitive. "The majority of transsexuals no longer have the spasmodic sensation that comes from squirting out semen. They have, instead, more of a spreading glow that is very satisfactory indeed," says Dr. John Money, a professor emeritus at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine who is an expert on the procedure.

The surgery costs about \$11,000. If it includes other plastic surgery — a nose job, trimming the Adam's apple, breast implants — the total cost can exceed \$25,000. No insurance policy covers the procedure.

Though the operation sounds traumatic, it wasn't for Rothblatt. "The reaction from so many was, 'My God, how could you get rid of your penis?'" Rothblatt remembers. "But look, half the world doesn't have one, and I don't notice any of them jumping off cliffs because of it."

The family transition was also smooth, and these days the Rothblatts tote out board games after dinner, rent paddle boats near the Jefferson Memorial, ski in Vermont, and hike along the Susquehanna River. Rothblatt's younger children think nothing of bursting into her office, running into her arms and exclaiming, "Daddy!"

Perhaps more difficult for Rothblatt, the transformation limited her ability to publicly express her affection for Bina. "For 10 years of our relationship we could walk down the street and at least hold hands," relates Rothblatt. "If we were in a restaurant, we kissed when we wanted to kiss and danced when we wanted to dance. Now, for fear of being beaten up, I have to think twice about all that."

In private, however, Martine and Bina get along very well, thank you. "I would say that, physically, our relationship is extremely gratifying," Bina says. "Since we are both very open, we share what is pleasing for us. I have chosen to love a person because I love her. It never depended on having a penis or a vagina."



Ribbons of April sun filter through the WorldSpace conference room as Rothblatt negotiates her way through a lengthy conference call. Wearing a thigh-length brown sweater tunic over a blouse patterned in browns and burnt sienna, her wavy hair held in a matching brown "scrunchy," Rothblatt delicately flicks ashes from her cigarette into an ashtray. Crossing her legs at the ankle, her customary flat-heeled shoes tapping on the carpet, Rothblatt is completely at home here.

Her looks still surprise, however. Even through the plexiglass wall of the conference room, Rothblatt's size — she's still six feet tall — is striking. Rarely do you see a woman this big. (Except for Attorney General Janet Reno, an example Rothblatt points to often and proudly.) Rothblatt dresses in size 14, loose-fitting tunics, sometimes accented with taupe and evergreen scarves, perhaps to conceal her Adam's apple. Foundation makeup and blush encircle her deep-set brown eyes. The heavy silver bracelet around a relatively slim wrist

tries to compensate for hands that look like they could palm a basketball. Her voice is of a theatrical ingenue, especially in its girlish “hi’s” and “byes” at the office. It gets huskier when she engages in serious conversation.

After her sex change, Rothblatt could have left her field or rebuilt her life in another city. But she wanted to pursue her career enough to tough things out in Washington, a city where private lives often bring public ones crashing to a halt. Though the surgery had gone well, she was nervous about her public reception. “My first day back at work, when I walked through these doors, my heart was beating so very, very fast,” recalls Rothblatt, tapping on WorldSpace’s double glass entry. “But everyone just gave me a hug, said I looked really good, and within 15 minutes it was back to work.”

That reception wasn’t entirely accidental. The advance word among Rothblatt’s colleagues was to try not to make a big deal of their boss’s new look. It seemed to work. After about a week of becoming acclimated, Rothblatt’s colleagues picked up where they left off, having her join their regular lunch and cocktail hour trips to Charley’s Crab or Rumors, the 19th Street pick-up joint.

“When Martine returned, she looked very, very nice, very conservative, with nothing flamboyant, like a lot of eye shadow,” says co-worker Deborah King.

At the Motorola Corporation, a partner with Rothblatt on the AfriSpace project, there was also

apparent indifference to Rothblatt’s sex change.

“We are so dominated by rational, logical science types that emotion and bias about a person’s makeup just don’t enter in,” says a Motorola executive.

Cropping up now are small symbols of acceptance. She has received her first bouquet of flowers from a colleague. “And one person came up to me

at a conference,” relates Rothblatt. “He studied my name tag, hovered around me, and then proclaimed, ‘I’ve dealt with your brother.’”

How Rothblatt introduced her new self contributed to the ease of her acceptance. “I would call up an old

contact and say, ‘Since we last met, I’ve gone through a change of gender. So when you next see me, I will look like a woman,’” Rothblatt says. “The key was to do it with no apology and to look like a thoroughly professional female. In fact, one person on meeting me said I looked much better as a woman than a man.”



Rothblatt doesn’t like to believe it, but things could have worked out differently. Had her accomplishments been any less decorated, she could easily have been shunned by her peers. But Rothblatt’s professional stature — which is to say, her ability to make money for other people — made her indispensable.

“If Martine didn’t have a firm place in the industry but was just starting out by herself and was rather mediocre, it would be the kiss of death,” says Cecily Holiday of the FCC.

Rothblatt disagrees, citing transsexual airline pilots, firemen, and construction workers as proof of transsexuals who’ve succeeded in fields more stereotypically masculine than hers. “I just try to imagine what it was to go from a man to a woman in that intensely masculine world of laying pipe,” she says.

But Rothblatt’s competence isn’t always what people see when they look at her now. Some who know her say that after the operation Rothblatt was asked to step down from the board of one of her companies. “None of the chief executives in my business ever said they didn’t want to do business with me because I came out,” Rothblatt insists. Martine’s spouse Bina, a partner in several of their offshoot companies, denies that anyone approached them directly about withdrawing. But Rothblatt did choose to leave several board positions, turning over fund-raising tasks to successors.

Some of Rothblatt’s business contacts are decidedly unsure how her change might affect the personal chemistry vital to deal-making. One Washington businessman now takes special steps to prepare for a meeting with Rothblatt. He reminds himself not to stare, nor to listen for when Rothblatt’s voice might break and reveal its original masculine timbre. “It just isn’t that often in a business environment to sit across from a transsexual who, at certain angles, could look like a man in drag,” explains the executive. Then there are other questions. “Do I open the door for her, do I push her chair in at a restaurant — I mean, she’s bigger than I am,” says the flustered businessman.

“It just isn’t that often in the business environment that you sit across from a transsexual.”

"If you open the door for me," Rothblatt responds, "I'll say thank you, and if you pull out a chair for me at a restaurant, I'll accept it — as any woman would."

The problem for some is that Rothblatt isn't just any woman, no matter how much she may feel like one. "In the white shirt, flow-chart world of business that I come from, there is a certain protocol. People are just pegged by their appearance," notes the businessman. "If someone comes to a meeting dressed as a woman but you know she was a man, she begins to look more like a man dressed as a woman. Now, while it doesn't impact her ability to do her job, it might become such a distraction that people forget to listen to her."

"Negotiations de-sex everyone," Rothblatt insists. "Sure, during the first encounter, there is a sexual component, but once you get past that, it's about money and a sale. The truth is, the biggest disadvantage I have as a business woman is that I'm colder in the winter and my shoes don't last as long."

Rothblatt not only faces discrimination from those who know that she was once a man; she also faces it from people who don't. She now hears the "honeys" and "sweeties" that Martin was spared. At industry trade



shows, she's been snubbed by those who are sure she can't be the boss. "When I was a man, everyone at a convention wanted to talk to me about doing a deal," recalls Rothblatt. "But as a woman, their attitude is whether I can refer them to whoever is responsible — which is usually me. Sometimes, they'll take me for a convention show girl."

The bottom line, Rothblatt admits, is that money makes the business world go round. "No one is investing in me per se, but in my company," she argues. "And my business vision is a little like semen. Once it's contributed to the egg, that's all you need."

As easy as Rothblatt makes that sound, her glibness masks a truth: a sex change is irreversible. Martine has no choice but to live with its consequences. •

— Andrew Marton wrote about Marvin Mandel for the January-February issue of *Regardie's*.