By Loree Cook-Daniels

Although the trans person’s struggle with “stealth vs. out” ends at death, the question lives on for the transperson’s survivors. Trumpet (reviewed on page 22 of Connectivity Vol 7, Issue 1) is a fictional exploration of how one set of SOFFAs coped with the issues. Here are two real-life accounts.

Both stories involve what can only be called “successful” FTMs. Both were fathers of sons. Both had very supportive wives, and it was through those wives that their stories became intertwined.

I’ll call the widow who contacted me Jenny. Her husband Sam had recently died, and Jenny now needed help. She’d never been in contact with anyone in the FTM/SOFFA community before, but since her husband’s death she was facing issues she couldn’t figure out alone. Sam and Jenny had been very well-loved community leaders, especially known for their Scouting activities. They had a son, Jeremy, who was about 14. But Sam had died of cancer, and Jenny now faced the prospect of trying to support Jeremy alone. One of the things she’d done was file with the Social Security Administration (SSA) to get survivor’s benefits for him.

Unfortunately, SSA turned her down. They said that since Sam had a female birth certificate, he couldn’t have been Jeremy’s father as it said on his birth certificate, and there had been no adoption. Hence, Jeremy was not legally Sam’s child and not entitled to survivor’s benefits. They also said Jenny and Jeremy’s marriage certificate was invalid, so they refused her widow’s benefits, as well.

I tried to link Jenny with as many transgender family law experts as I could. Ironically, she already knew the name of one of them; Sam had been told to consult her to make sure his family was legally protected, but he had refused. She was a “known” transsexual, and he wanted nothing to do with transsexuals. No one but Jenny knew his history.

Marcelle and I were exactly the opposite; “everyone” knew our history. So I never thought to ask Jenny what happened when Sam first died, whether he died in a hospital or not, and how she managed with the myriad death officials. I therefore cannot compare her experience to mine or the fictional Millie Moody’s. And quite frankly, my memories of my own experience are fuzzy – that’s one of the blessings and curses of shock.

But I do know that when I woke the April 21, 2000 morning Marcelle and I were scheduled to leave on a romantic weekend and found his body, I immediately recognized there were implications to him being FTM. I knew that MTF Tyra Hunter had been ridiculed and undertreated by paramedics who responded to her auto accident. I knew people dealing with transgendered persons often take their cues from those around the transgendered person. As out as we were, chances were good that most of the people who showed up at our house would not know. I knew, in short, that in the first minutes of coping with my life partner’s suicide, I would need to come out and be both his advocate and a role model.
The paramedics were easy. I remember telling them Marcelle was a female-to-male transsexual, so to expect chest scars. (I don’t remember if I told them about the lack of lower surgery, or decided I’d told them enough that they wouldn’t be surprised at what they found.) The police quickly removed me from where the EMTs were working, and I turned to what ended up being the harder task: explaining to the policewoman that yes, I was married to the victim, it was important he be marked male, but yes, he was a transsexual. She was dense and confused, and I remember her questions making me feel even more panicked and lost. The coroners, thank god, were quite respectful. They understood when I said it would be important for Marcelle’s documents to be marked “male,” and promised to notify people down the line.

That was the first half-hour.

One person I did not expect would need to be notified was the funeral director. He and I had attended a weekly business meeting together for years, and I’d come out more than once at that meeting. It turned out he was on a few-day vacation. I told his father and staff that John would know the story, to call him, and that I would only deal with John. Unfortunately, when John returned he gently chided me for not telling him; it turned out he hadn’t been listening the times I came out and the grapevine had been uninterested in spreading the news I was married to a transsexual. I prefer not to think about what happened in that funeral home, given that they were not prepared as I’d thought. I hope that the fact I’d made clear I was a “friend” of John’s made them treat Marcelle’s body with dignity.

You’ll forgive me if I can’t remember when in the time period immediately before and after Marcelle’s death that Jenny confided that she’d broken down and told Jeremy that the reason she couldn’t get Social Security benefits for him is that his father was FTM and not, biologically, his father. Both Jeremy and Jenny were struggling to figure out the context in which to put the information. I tried to locate stories of FTMs who had not come from the lesbian community, and Jenny and I talked – perhaps for Jenny’s first time – about what it meant to her to be married to an FTM. Our backgrounds and approaches to life were “opposite” in terms of sexual orientation and outness, but we were united in our concern that Jeremy come to terms with his father’s and his
own history in a way that both made sense to Jeremy and was respectful of the choices Jenny and Sam had made.

Tragically, that process was cut short. Just two months after Marcelle’s suicide, I got an email Jenny’s brother sent to everyone in her address book. She’d died unexpectedly and suddenly of a blood disorder. Jeremy was orphaned, dealing now not only with that horrible fact but also having to struggle in complete isolation from anyone who knew his dad’s “secret” and what it meant to him and his mother.

I thought about Jeremy often and wanted to try to contact him, but my life was in shambles and I had my own fatherless child and widowhood with which to deal. It wasn’t until last month that I was finally able to sit down and search the Internet and my files for clues as to how I could contact Jeremy and offer, now or in the future, to be his bridge to information. I struggled to word the email carefully enough that Jeremy might understand what I was offering him without outing him or his parents, in case the adults around him still didn’t know.

I believe I found Jeremy’s uncle’s address, and I guessed at what Jeremy’s might be based on what his parents’ had been. Neither email bounced.

Neither email was answered.

Kai’s and my story has a more hopeful ending. Because Marcelle had birthed Kai, Kai’s right to his Social Security survivor’s benefits was not in question. Either because a court had already ruled Marcelle legally male and he and I legally married when they granted my adoption of Kai or because I came equipped with ample documentation, an attitude of “I’ll help you manage your own red tape,” and a very nicely veiled threat that I would be very public and persistent if they turned me down, SSA ruled my marriage valid and hence granted me survivor’s benefits, as well.

Kai still has me and his stepfather to help him understand his father’s gender-related thoughts, feelings, motives and decisions. Should he, too, get orphaned, he has our writings and interviews and will know how to contact “others like him” with whom to talk. He will, in short, have access to many clues to his father’s and mother’s life and decisions.

I cry for Jeremy, hoping he somehow has found or will find the same.