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Hugh Lessig

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Apprentice School wrestler makes history. She can weld, too.

<https://www.dailypress.com/business/shipyards/dp-nws-apprentice-school-welder-20190419-story.html>

Before working out with the wrestling team last week, Erin Aragon sat down and told a childhood story that was difficult to believe.

She was maybe 10 or 11 years when she forced herself to order a meal in a restaurant — out loud, by herself — for the very first time.

“I cried when I did it,” she said. “It was really, really bad.”

A phone interview with her mother confirmed this story. Lisa Aragon said her daughter was painfully shy and could not walk into a new experience without being terrified.

“Ordering was a big thing,” she said. “She could not order her own food.”

How things change.

Erin Aragon, 24, is the first female wrestler in the history of the Apprentice School at Newport News Shipbuilding. A national finalist in her first season, which ended last month, she’s already preparing for season No. 2.

Like other Apprentice School athletes, Aragon attends classes and works on the waterfront by day, helping build nuclear-powered aircraft carriers and submarines for the U.S. Navy.

Athletics are secondary, but important.

Last week, shortly after telling the story about the restaurant, she headed to the second floor of the school’s athletic complex on Marshall Avenue to grapple with Micah Amrozowicz, her coach and a shipyard construction supervisor.

Amrozowicz said he'd like to find a few more Erin Aragon so the Apprentice School can take advantage of the fast-growing sport of women's wrestling.

"Hands down, I would say she learns faster than anyone I've ever taught," he said.

She's also learning how to weld. That's one of the most in-demand jobs in Hampton Roads, where shipbuilding and ship repair form a cornerstone of the economy.

How she got turned on to welding is another story that 1) shows how far she's come and 2) requires the perspective of her mom.

Erin Aragon wrestles with her coach, Micah Amrozowicz, during an off-season practice for the Builder wrestling team at The Apprentice School Athletic Complex on April 23, 2019. Aragon is the first female wrestler in the history of The Apprentice School and is nationally ranked.

Erin Aragon wrestles with her coach, Micah Amrozowicz, during an off-season practice for the Builder wrestling team at The Apprentice School Athletic Complex on April 23, 2019. Aragon is the first female wrestler in the history of The Apprentice School and is nationally ranked. (Sarah Holm / Daily Press)

An 'existential crisis'

Her shyness aside, Aragon was a top performer in school. Thanks to advanced courses, she graduated with a 4.2 grade point average, better than perfect. But she also wanted to grow socially.

"I needed to be out of my comfort zone to do anything," she said.

So she went to college in Flagstaff, Ariz., about 90 miles from home. Aside from an internship at Disney World, her experience wasn't what she hoped. Her grades dropped to Cs and Ds. She wasn't making friends. She had thought about majoring in journalism, changed it to marketing, then realized she didn't want sit at a desk all day.

She called mom and blurted out that maybe she should just go be a welder.

For Lisa Aragon, welding was no frivolous matter.

As the assistant superintendent of a joint technical education district in northern Arizona, she saw how successful partnerships between local colleges and high schools propelled students into a skilled trade. If her daughter had thoughts of being a welder, mom might just make that happen.

"We had three welding instructors through the college that I partnered with," Lisa Aragon recalled. "I called the head teacher."

Erin Aragon took to it immediately. She enjoyed the instructor's description of welders. He called them "confident recluses."

You're hiding behind a mask all day, but people will see what you do. I was like, that's exactly what I want.

“You’re hiding behind a mask all day, but people will see what you do,” she said. “I was like, that’s exactly what I want.”

That prompted another move. Her older sister was a sailor on the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln and living in Portsmouth. Aragon decided to move across the country to Hampton Roads and start a new chapter.

She landed a job at a local Panera Bread, working the early shift, where her boss did two things that altered her course even further. He told her about apprenticeships and introduced her to the martial art of jiu-jitsu.

Apprentice School beckons

Aragon entered the Apprentice School in 2017 and continued advancing in jiu-jitsu. A shipyard supervisor came to one of her jiu-jitsu competitions, and that supervisor knew Amrozowicz, who had been trying to establish a women’s wrestling program.

“I’ve always wanted to do it, but I didn’t know how to get it going,” he said. “It made it really easy that she was already an apprentice.”

And pretty good at wrestling, as it turns out.

Although the school doesn’t field a full women’s team, Aragon travels with the men’s squad and wrestles exhibitions when the Apprentice School competes against other schools that have female wrestlers. In practical terms, that meant she wrestled only a couple of women during the 2018-19 season

That changed earlier this year when the team competed in the National Collegiate Wrestling Association (NCWA) tournament in Allen, Texas.

Wrestling at 123 pounds, Aragon scored back-to-back first-period pins to advance to the finals against three-time national champion Marina Goocher from the University of Michigan Dearborn.

Aragon lost in the finals but said the overall experience was “overwhelming.” Goocher is graduating, so Aragon can’t face her again.

Not that she would mind.

“I gave her her fourth national title — I don’t think about it at all,” she deadpanned.

Her coach’s take? “I still believe we could have beat her if we made it to the second period.”

The transition from jiu-jitsu to college wrestling has taken some work. In jiu-jitsu, it’s OK to be on your back to secure submission holds. In wrestling, being on your back is a shortcut to getting pinned. That aside, Amrozowicz said the switch has been positive.

“The sports really complement each other,” he said. “And it’s paid off.”

Acceptance

For the coach, one question that remained concerned other members of the team. How would the men accept a female wrestler? It turned out to be a nonissue

“Nobody, nobody, disrespected her in any way,” he said.

In a company promotional video about Aragon, wrestler Chad Simmons said the difference is overstated.

“I don’t like this whole thing about her being labeled a woman wrestler,” said Simmons, a rigger apprentice. “You know, she’s just a wrestler to me. She’s just another person. She’s just another teammate. She’s another workout partner, just another person that’s in here grinding with all of us. And I appreciate it.”

Two captains share a bond with the former USS John F. Kennedy

<https://www.dailypress.com/military/dp-nw-christening-kennedy-two-captains-20191201-ovnp6mnffjbltgy347fitvd4me-story.html>

Earl “Buddy” Yates and Dennis FitzPatrick grew up nearly 40 years apart, but they are cut from the same Navy cloth and united by the aircraft carrier known as “Big John.”

The USS John F. Kennedy was commissioned in 1968 and saw service over four decades. Yates was its first captain and molded the initial crew at the height of the Cold War. FitzPatrick was the last officer to command Kennedy in combat, taking over in 2004 during the bitter fight for Fallujah in the Iraq War.

Both men had distinguished careers apart from Kennedy and retired from the Navy as rear admirals.

The ship was decommissioned in 2007, but its presence will loom large over Newport News Shipbuilding on Dec. 7, when a new carrier will be christened in the name of the 35th president.

More than 150 retired sailors from the original Kennedy are expected to attend the ceremony, according to Bob Haner, a Florida resident who heads the JFK association. The group is holding its reunion this week in Virginia Beach to coincide with the event.

“We’re proud and we’re happy,” said Haner. “Understandably, we’re also kind of sad. In some ways, we wish our ship was still out there serving.”

Yates and FitzPatrick can relate.

A career of transitions

Born in 1923, Yates grew up in North Carolina with a sister who was a year and a half older. When she was in first grade, he paid attention to her homework. When she hit second grade, he learned some more from her.

“I finally got to the same class as my sister and graduated the same year,” he said.

At 15, he enrolled in the University of North Carolina, but then entered the U.S. Naval Academy in 1940. He was technically a member of the Class of 1944, but he graduated in June 1943, the accelerated schedule due to World War II.

Retired General Earl Yates was the first commanding officer on the aircraft carrier JFK CVA 67. Yates talks about getting the carrier ready for deployment.

He served on the destroyer USS Dyson in the Pacific Theater, arriving sometime after the future president Kennedy survived a harrowing episode when his patrol torpedo boat, the PT-109, was cut in half by a Japanese warship. Kennedy, then a young lieutenant, was credited with rescuing injured members of his crew.

“President Kennedy already had his PT-109 problem and had gone back to the states by the time I got out to the war,” Yates said. “We did some refueling and replenishing of PT boats quite a bit. We never got to do the PT-109.”

Yates returned to the states later in World War II and trained as a pilot. He continued to advance from the late 1940s through the 1950s as military aviation transitioned from propeller-driven planes to jet aircraft. He furthered his education along the way and commanded fighter squadrons.

He never doubted his ability to command at a higher level.

“Every fighter pilot I’ve ever known that was worth being called a fighter pilot wanted his own aircraft carrier some day,” Yates said. “Because he always felt he could do it better.”

He got his wish in 1967, when the Navy tapped him as the prospective commanding officer of the future John F. Kennedy.

The ship would occupy a unique place in naval history. The Navy had already commissioned the world’s first nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, the USS Enterprise, in 1961. Kennedy was originally ordered as a nuclear-powered ship, but that decision was later changed. It became the last conventionally powered U.S. aircraft carrier.

Yates had to bring on a new crew, instill his own style of command climate and prepare the ship for its first deployment.

There was also the commissioning ceremony in September 1968. The president’s brother, Robert Kennedy, had been assassinated earlier that year and Yates remembered how everyone was concerned about security.

“I breathed a sigh of relief when the Navy Blue Angels flew over and we got the commissioning ceremony over,” he said. “The security had been successful. There were no problems.”

The stress didn’t stop there. The first time the ship set sail from Naval Station Norfolk, an electrical problem forced the crew to shut down the boilers. The ship headed for the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel without helm control.

Families of sailors had raced from the naval base to the bridge, getting ahead of the ship. They were waving furiously, ushering the ship to sea and unaware of the problem. Thankfully, the ship was lined up to safely pass the bridge-tunnel.

“We figured it right,” he said. “We were going a little bit sideways, but we went right down the middle. It was just silent. Everything had been shut down.”

The problem was fixed and the ship continued on. Later in the trip, the ship underwent a refueling and there was a more welcome moment. Dolphins galore swam alongside the Kennedy, a sight Yates said he will never forget.

“I think that was probably the greatest welcome to the seas any ship has ever had,” he said. “It was a remarkable experience.”

No time to relax

Capt. FitzPatrick, a native of upstate New York, went to Cornell University on an ROTC scholarship. He had a young man’s taste for adventure and gravitated to the life of a naval aviator.

“It was just a great career,” he said. “I think I would have gone nuts if I had gone straight into a desk job.”

He took command of the Kennedy in October 2004 with the ship in the Arabian Gulf and fighter jets were flying combat sorties into Iraq. About one month later, the U.S. began Operation Phantom Fury, a furious bid to liberate Fallujah, about 30 miles west of Baghdad.

FitzPatrick had to hit the ground running.

“The ship had to perform,” FitzPatrick said.

Dennis FitzPatrick, who took command of the USS John F. Kennedy (CV 67) in 2004, describes his experience leading the aircraft carrier's crew.

He quickly found the Kennedy to his liking. The ship had a natural rhythm to it — it’s hard to describe, but unmistakable when a commander experiences it, he said.

“This is a hard business, long days and short nights,” he said. “But the crew was operationally focused and stayed on mission.”

The Kennedy was relieved later in November and sailed home. On Dec. 30, the Navy announced its intention to decommission the ship.

FitzPatrick made it his mission to stay engaged with the crew, which had a lot of questions. The ship had been through a challenging time, and not only because of a busy combat tour.

The Kennedy “was underfunded for much of her lifetime, particularly late in life,” FitzPatrick said. The evidence was plain to see — corrosion work, the need for maintenance — but the crew still shined.

“What I remember most is how resilient the crew was in keeping that ship up and operating under difficult conditions,” he said. “What I remember is being surrounded by incredibly talented people.”

When it came to talk of decommissioning, FitzPatrick answered questions as best he could.

“I found the best way to do it was to be honest with them — here’s what I know. I realize it’s not satisfactory. I got it. But it’s all we know right now. It was a constant drumbeat of conversation.”

FitzPatrick was not the Kennedy’s final commanding officer. In May 2006, he was relieved by then-Capt. Todd A. Zechin. The ship was ultimately decommissioned in March 2007.

As for the new John F. Kennedy? FitzPatrick said it’s nice to see the name live on, but a ship is only gray metal hull until the crew comes aboard.

“There are still a lot of people who are emotionally attached to the ship,” he said. “But I think they are emotionally attached to the experience. It’s all about the people. It’s all about being part of a team.”

Transgender veteran: 'I may never be whole'

<https://www.dailypress.com/military/dp-nws-transgender-veteran-20181112-story.html>

Once a binge drinker, Sarah Quidley is on the path to sobriety. Formerly homeless, she has a roof over her head.

Both changes came with the help of the Hampton VA Medical Center. Her third transition is more of a challenge.

Sarah Quidley began life as George Quidley. After years of living a secretive life, she decided last year at age 62 to publicly identify as female and begin a transition.

She has relied on the Department of Veterans Affairs for hormone therapy, but VA medical benefits do not yet cover the surgery to complete a transformation that has been a life-long dream.

“I may never be whole, but I can be whole-er,” Quidley said back in November, when she temporarily stayed at the Hampton VA. “Who knows in five years what the VA might do? In five years, we might have a different medical system.”

A change could happen before then.

Last year, the VA sought public comment on whether it should continue to exclude transition-related surgery for transgender veterans. It received more than 6,000 comments.

It happened after advocacy groups submitted a petition and filed a lawsuit asking that the surgery be included as a medical benefit. To date, the VA hasn't ruled and there is no required time frame for doing so, a spokeswoman said.

So Quidley waits.

While the VA can only help her to an extent, she credits the LGBT program at the Hampton VA for helping to overcome the hurdles.

It just took me 62 years to realize I am the way I am. ... I was afraid to jump off the fence, until I realized I would just like to be who I am before I die.

“It just took me 62 years to realize I am the way I am,” Quidley said. “I sat on the fence for so long and didn't know where I fit in. I was afraid to jump off the fence, until I realized I would just like to be who I am before I die.”

‘Always a loner’

Quidley was born in Edenton, N.C., the second of five children. The oldest was Delores, who was struck and killed by a car at age 5. In a perfect world, Delores would still be around. Even as young children, they would discuss things and argue.

Delores would say she was a girl and Sarah — then George — would say he was a girl, too.

“She would say, ‘no, you're a boy.’ Even back then, I knew I was not who I was,” Quidley said.

But Quidley never really confided in anyone. Growing up, she would go to the attic and put on her younger sister's slip or dress.

“I knew at that age that what I was doing was not, quote, proper. It was all right for me, but not for everybody else.”

It never paid to take chances.

“One time in high school, I was going to be brave and I signed up to take home economics,” she said. “After going to the first class I chickened out and had it changed. I just didn't want to be labeled queer. Back in them days, that's what anybody who was different was called.”

Coast Guard might 'fix me'

After graduating high school in 1973, Quidley entered the Coast Guard.

"I didn't want to get drafted and be found out that I was gay — well, different — so I said, well, if go into the Coast Guard, I can save people and not have to shoot people," she said.

The military beckoned for another reason, too.

"Maybe it'll fix me," she remembered thinking. "Maybe that's what I need. Of course, it didn't change me. I still didn't have anybody I could talk to, so I drank every night. You would go ashore, drink, come back and sleep. Everything was still a secret."

Quidley spent 2-½ years on a buoy tender in Alaska and another two years in Elizabeth City, N.C., then a final six months in Portsmouth. Upon leaving the military, another opportunity to be "normal" presented itself.

Her name was Judy, a pretty woman with long hair. Quidley enjoyed being around Judy. Could marriage be the solution? Judy was pregnant at the time but the father was out of the picture. Before tying the knot, Quidley took Judy to a private beach. Under a setting sun, Judy learned Quidley's secret.

"She accepted it. I really think she thought she could fix me."

They got married on July 22, Quidley's birthday.

"It was nice, but there was a longing to be me that I couldn't hide," Quidley said. "I had to tell her, being married is still not fixing me. You're still open for that fix, but I'm the way I am and there's nothing going to change it."

Their marriage lasted 11 months. Judy has since died.

Drinking, homelessness, acceptance

After the divorce, Quidley worked at various jobs and the heavy drinking continued.

Several years ago, an infected hip led to a one-year hiatus from drinking. But then it returned with a vengeance. Quidley became a binge drinker and eventually drew disability payments because of back problems and arthritis. Every pay day, the bills would be paid and the drinking would commence.

She ended up living in a trailer owned by her little brother. The two had always been close, and Quidley confided in him. This was well before Quidley began taking hormones. To the little brother, Quidley was still George.

"I think he was surprised, but coming out was a relief," she said.

Quidley's brother died in May. The trailer that served as Quidley's residence was willed to Quidley's niece. That's what led to homelessness, and what eventually brought the Hampton VA into the picture.

Quidley was seeing a VA doctor at a clinic in Elizabeth City, N.C. Confiding in the doctor led to the start of hormone therapy around mid-September, and because Quidley was homeless, she ended up on the medical center's Hampton campus, living in the domiciliary, receiving treatment for alcoholism and enrolling in the LGBT program.

The structured life of the domiciliary coupled with counseling and hormone therapy started the healing process.

"One important thing with the VA, they put me in with the women," Quidley said. "They call me by Sarah, the name I've chosen, even though legally they still got me as George Marshall. As far as they're concerned, that's a dead name. If I could change it now I would, but that's a process you have to go through."

Quidley felt at home.

"I really think it was the way I was accepted by the guys," she said. "Nobody, as far as I could tell, looked down on me or said anything derogatory about me. That really helped out."

A growing program

The VA began its national LGBT program in 2012, focusing on developing policies to provide quality care. When you have policies, you need someone to implement them. In Hampton, that person is Tiffany Lange-Altman, a clinical psychologist and the medical center's LGBT coordinator.

"I've come in contact with hundreds and hundreds of LGBT veterans," she said. "We went from having no LGBT kind of services a number of years ago ... to really taking off and having a whole host of things."

Recently, Hampton was named a co-recipient of the Veterans Health Administration grant — in partnership with the VA hospital in Tuscaloosa, Ala. — to help spread a 10-week LGBT health education group to eight other VA health facilities. The Hampton VA has also been designated a leader in LGBT health-care quality by the Human Rights Campaign.

For Lange-Altman, the larger task is creating a culture of acceptance and promoting a holistic approach, integrating LGBT into all levels of care.

Veterans are often surprised that the VA even has an LGBT program, she said. Some served under the old "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" approach to gays in the military. Now they want to connect with other like-minded veterans or build a support system. Or their wishes can be more basic. Are they welcomed? Can they receive care? Is their LGBT identity acknowledged and do providers understand how it impacts health care?

At Hampton, health care providers who have gone through the training Lange-Altman offers received a rainbow-colored magnet to display in their offices. It seems like a small thing, but that magnet has worked wonders, she said.

Hampton VA patients “know that’s a thing here” and will immediately feel more at ease when they see that magnet in the office.

That’s important, Lange-Altman said, because “the conversation needs to happen when I’m not in the room.”

LGBT patients can skip appointments if they think a doctor isn’t sympathetic or simply not listening to them. Skipped appointments can translate into problems. And because a segment of society remains hostile to gays and transgender people, the population can be more susceptible to health problems.

“If you constantly hear that who you love is wrong, you might isolate yourself, drink a lot, hang out with people who aren’t good to you and become traumatized ...” she said.

She cited one estimate that pegged the number of LGBT veterans at 1 million. Transgender veterans in particular have a high percentage of military service, she said, which in a way makes sense.

“If biologically I identify as a female but my brain is telling me male, I can go into the military and take on more of a masculine role that fits,” she said. “But if you’re biologically male and your brain is telling you female, maybe you think ‘the military will make a man out of me.’”

Too old to worry

Quidley found out the hard way that the military won’t change a person, nor will marriage. She left the Hampton VA in late November and is now living near Boston, working at a VA facility in a simple job that involves answering the phone.

At the time of her interview, she was two months into hormone therapy. Her hair was almost shoulder length and pulled behind her head. She felt some changes — breast development, her hair feeling less coarse — and feels more at home.

“If I got a skirt on, it’s not so bad, but wearing pants like I am now, I know I don’t look very feminine.” She chuckled. “Let’s not joke around about that.”

While at Hampton, one program she enjoyed was receiving spa-like treatments at the Virginia School of Hair Design in downtown Hampton. The recreational therapy program is designed to boost the self-esteem of veterans, build social skills and decrease feelings of isolation.

Kay Kerr, a certified recreational therapist, said Quidley also enjoyed tending to the garden outside the female unit domiciliary.

“Often other veterans, staff/visitors would walk past as she gardened and complimented her efforts,” Kerr said in an email.

Quidley left Hampton in late November. Life is good and there is always the possibility that the VA could change its policy on gender-alteration surgery.

“I don’t know how much longer I’ll live, hopefully another fifty years,” Quidley said. “I just finally said, I’m too old to have to worry about what somebody else is going to think about me.”