

Dr. Joëlle Ruby Ryan: A life in social justice

Dr. Joëlle Ruby Ryan is currently a Senior Lecturer in Women's Studies at UNH. Joëlle identifies as a queer, asexual, non-binary transgender woman and uses They/Them/Their pronouns. They earned their BA in Women's Studies from UNH in 1996 and their MA in English Literature from UNH in 2002. They completed their Ph.D. at Bowling Green State University in 2009 in American Culture Studies, writing their dissertation on images of transgender people in film and media.

When they arrived at UNH in the Fall of 1992, they had experienced twelve years of severe bullying at school due to their gender expression. Due to this trauma, they were extremely depressed and uninterested in continuing in the education system due to the way it had felt so oppressive to them. When they took their first Women's Studies course a year later, it literally changed and revolutionized their life. Coinciding with their own coming out as queer and transgender, Joëlle slowly began to regain the self-confidence that had been stripped from them in the corridors of the school system and to ascertain greater clarity about their own identities. Most of all, the tools they were learning in Women's Studies enabled them to see the value in a more liberatory education and make sense of their own experiences in the context of a transphobic, homophobic and misogynistic patriarchal society rather than through the lens of self-hate and internalized oppression. They declared their major in Women's Studies soon thereafter and threw themselves headlong into activism and in to educating others about their own transgender experience. It was an exhilarating time personally for Joëlle as well as a period when there was basically zero visibility and education about gender identity. Working independently and through educational panels, Joëlle went into innumerable classes, residence halls, community groups and social service agencies to educate attendees about gender identity and gender expression, often presenting to ignorant or even hostile audiences. While there was support among many non-trans queer people, there was also significant transphobia in the gay and lesbian community at that time, prompting Joelle to form the first transgender group at UNH: The Transgender Liberation Coalition [TLC].

One of the first things TLC did was to bring the renowned author and activist Leslie Feinberg to campus. After reading the novel *Stone Butch Blues*, Joëlle was mesmerized and deeply moved by a story that resonated so deeply with their own experience. They wrote Leslie a letter and received a reply stating that ze was interested in speaking at UNH and that ze hoped Joëlle would always remain as "strong and as proud" as in their letter. After introducing Leslie to a packed house at UNH, ze thanked Joëlle and called them a fellow "transgender warrior." This gesture felt akin to a knighting of sorts, a passing on of the baton to a younger but no less passionate activist-in-the-making for transgender rights and social justice. In the over two decades since that momentous speech, Joëlle has taken Leslie's invitation seriously and worked tirelessly to lift up the voices and experiences of one of the most vulnerable populations in the U.S., indeed in the whole world. This experience has also made them aware of the experiences of oppressed groups that they do not belong to and the importance of standing in solidarity under an intersectional feminist vision of liberation.

Joelle has penned a book of poems entitled *Gender Quake*, co-produced three autobiographical documentary films about their trans identity with trans ally Peter Welch, and founded and led multiple organizations and committees related to gender and social justice. They founded the statewide organization New Hampshire Transgender Resources for Education and Empowerment [NH-TREE] in 2002 which eventually morphed into Transgender New Hampshire [TGNH] in 2009; both of which have held numerous conferences, potlucks, and community-building events. At UNH, they founded or cofounded Gender Identities Awareness [GIA] Week; The Transecting Society [TSC] Conference; The Transgender Policy and Climate Committee [TPACC]; and Queering the Spirit, an ongoing discussion series about the intersections of LGBTQ+ communities and religion/spirituality. They have served on the President's Commission on the Status of Women and have Co-Chaired the President's Commission on the Status of LGBTQ People. They also serve as the Faculty Advisor for People Opposing Weightism [POW!] and speak frequently on issues related to the fat acceptance movement. They are involved with several academic and activist conferences including the National Women's Studies Association [NWSA] where they founded and formally chaired the Trans/Gender-Variant Caucus and Fat Studies Interest Group, the Desiree Alliance Sex Workers' Right Conference and the Society for Disability Studies [SDS].

After nearly 25 years of activism, teaching, writing and speaking, Joëlle has been looking at the rewarding and challenging components of a life in social justice, and trying to prioritize self-care, spirituality and personal growth and development. One of the hardest things about being a very vocal activist has been the impact on relationships and the in-fighting within progressive communities. Burn-out is a very real phenomenon and there is often not enough emphasis on creating activisms that are sustainable, creative, enriching and based in spiritual principles. Joëlle looks forward to infusing more of these values into their life through an emphasis on meditation, prayer, Reiki, acupuncture and ritual. While the life they lived isn't necessarily the one they envisioned for themselves, they feel grateful that they have been able to forge a highly unique existence where they constantly push against the status quo and envision a radically different world based in equity, justice and a genuine valuing of people's differences. At the end of Leslie Feinberg's novel *Stone Butch Blues*, the protagonist Jess repeats the phrase that her activist mentor has taught her: "*Imagine a world worth living in, a world worth fighting for.*" Joëlle comes back to these simple words again and again, for they encapsulate the very essence of their life, and provide a litany for a fierce but exhilarating struggle: the dawn of a new day and a new world in which we will all be free.

Joelle has taught the following courses: First-Year Writing; Introduction to Women's Studies; Transgender Identities in American Culture and Politics; Cultural Pluralism in the U.S.; Introduction to Ethnic Studies; Framing Feminism: Gender Politics in Film; Gender in the Horror Film; Gender, Power and Privilege; Transgender Feminism; Feminist Activism; The Roads to Equality; Trans/Forming Gender; Women's Studies Internship; The Global Sex Industry; Queer Cinema and Feminist Thought. In the coming year, Joelle will also teach Disability Justice and Weight Matters: An Introduction to Fat Studies.

Joelle's teaching philosophy is based in social justice and contemplative pedagogy. Teaching is not the mere transfer of information between one person and another. Nor is it one "all-knowing" expert who deigns to teach the ignorant and uninitiated the "Truth." For Joelle, teaching is a dynamic and active exchange, whereby knowledge is a tool circulated amongst a community of active learners with the ultimate goal of improving the world in which all people live. Teaching can often be characterized by ever-changing challenges, frustrations, disappointments and missed opportunities. In some respects, teaching is a continual trail-by-fire with few fail-safe outcomes. However, despite these concerns, Joelle wholeheartedly believes that teaching can transform minds and rejuvenate spirits. As Gandhi famously said: "You must be the change you want to see in the world." Through their teaching, they hope to model values of integrity, perseverance and critical thinking to entice their students to learn more and act more. Imagining and actively creating a more livable world must go hand-in-hand. Teaching is an inherently messy process, particularly when one is teaching about controversial issues such as race, class, gender, and sexuality. However, to Joelle the rewards are worth the struggle as they see students genuinely challenge their core assumptions and consider ways to achieve a new and improved social order. Teaching is a noble profession not because of how learned one becomes, but because of the degree to which one takes that knowledge and gives of it freely to improve the lives of students. The greatest gift of teaching for Joelle is to rouse students to, as Audre Lorde said, engage in the "transformation of silence into language and action," actions which can give birth to a more just, equitable and peaceful world.