



Kindness Over Everything

Angela Swan's path
to gender affirmation
models personal integrity,
professional excellence and
lasting impact

AIRD BERLIS

Angela Swan's unexpected entry into the legal profession in the 1960s launched an illustrious career and a profound journey toward authenticity. Today, Angela is admired as one of Canada's most influential leaders in contract law. Over the years, her work as a lawyer and professor has resulted in numerous awards, including the Order of Canada, the Ontario Bar Association's Award for Distinguished Service and three honorary degrees. At Aird & Berlis LLP, she has provided expert counsel on some of the country's most complex cases, offering guidance that influenced decisions at the Supreme Court of Canada. Her legacy is one of kindness, courage and excellence in her field.

But behind the high achievement, a more personal journey was simultaneously unfolding as Angela quietly wrestled with a complex and often painful struggle with her identity. In 2006, she transitioned and began living openly as a transgender woman.

As such, Angela's professional journey is more than a distinguished legal career – it is a powerful example of resilience in a world that often demands conformity. For years, she excelled in a field she loved, even as the burden of denying her true self quietly grew heavier. When she finally embraced her identity as a transgender woman, the legal community closest to her responded with compassion, acceptance and support. Angela is a pioneer for challenging the traditional norms and boundaries of what it can mean to live your truth, and her story is a reminder that living authentically

is not only an act of courage – it is one of the greatest forms of service.

Through it all, kindness reigned supreme. “The most important human quality is kindness,” Angela told the *Law Times* in 2023. “If we are kind, every problem we face is manageable. If we are not kind, a great many problems are made immeasurably more difficult to solve, if a solution is even conceivable.”

Feeling Odd in Ireland

Angela grew up as John Swan in Ballyshannon, Ireland, but at six or seven years of age, she questioned her gender identity. Already then, Angela knew with absolute certainty that she experienced gender dysphoria – the distress a person feels when their gender identity doesn’t match the sex they were assigned at birth – but at that age, she didn’t have the language to name it. Never in her wildest imagination did Angela think she could ever live her truth, the truth of who she really was.

Angela was raised in a hardworking family that valued practicality. Her father managed a salmon fishery in town and, while the family didn’t suffer financially, their Protestant beliefs set them apart, leaving them with few friends in a community where Catholicism dominated. This isolation made life more difficult. Angela and her younger siblings often entertained each other since they lacked friends nearby.

At the age of eight, Angela was sent away to an all-boys private boarding school near Dublin. There she experienced extreme homesickness, being so far away from her family at an impressionable age for nine months of the year. Angela returned home for a few weeks at a time for holidays, only to face the lonely existence on the other side of the country once again. She became reclusive and was left to battle her gender dysphoria entirely on her own, an internal tension which she describes as her “demons.” The harmful feelings weren’t something she could talk about, as the culture of the day offered no easy access to language or information to support gender-diverse people. It would be many decades before society at large would make space for this identity group.

Angela adopted the traits of her pragmatic father, despite the distance from his direct influence. Voicing internal challenges or openly sharing feelings was not encouraged in the family, and Angela learned early on to hide her emotional suffering and try to resolve her struggles alone. These were concepts she would wrestle with well into adulthood and were the root of her desire to avoid conflict in future relationships.

An Accidental Love of Law

Angela was just 18 years old when her father was left without a job after the local fishery shut down. It was the mid-1950s and the family relocated to Canada, settling in British Columbia where they

lived near another Irish family they knew. Angela, then not yet living as a woman, fell head over heels for Carol, the eldest daughter of the neighbouring family, and enrolled in a commerce degree at the University of British Columbia to be closer to her new love. It turned out Angela loathed commerce, and the only way to change her focus of study was to transfer to a commerce and law degree.

Much to Angela's surprise and delight, she had a passion for law and was immensely successful in her courses. A humble and focused student, Angela excelled in her studies and completed a law degree in 1963. She continued to contend with her inner demons, though they had quieted somewhat due in part to the heavy academic workload.

Because of her exceptional achievement at UBC, Angela was awarded multiple scholarships from the world's most renowned universities, including the University of Oxford. As a Commonwealth Scholar, her brilliant mind was on the radar of intellectuals back in Canada as well and, as she walked out of the prestigious doors of Oxford in 1965, she promptly accepted a teaching position at the University of Toronto, where she worked for more than two decades.

At that time, she was only three years older than the students in her classes, which often left her unnerved. But she reframed her nervousness into a sign that she was taking the work seriously – a mindset she carried throughout her life. Angela faced her fear and once again thrived in the

learning environment of post-secondary education. She loved teaching and often walked away from class with a deeper understanding of the material than when the lesson began.

During this period, Angela married a woman she had met at Oxford, and they had two children. The family returned to England for Angela's sabbatical and when the term was up, her wife decided to stay in the U.K. with their children – a heartbreaking occurrence for Angela. The distance took a toll on the relationship with her children and became another emotional challenge. The marriage ended but, over time and with effort, Angela found a way to rebuild some of the closeness that was lost with her children.

Gender Dysphoria Causing Harm

While suffering with intense emotional strain and a relentless urge to abandon her male gender, Angela fell in love once again and married another woman, this time one of her former students. They had twin daughters but ultimately the challenges concerning Angela's gender dysphoria were too much for the relationship to bear. Angela and her wife eventually parted ways but remained close friends.

Unbeknownst to Angela at the time, her daughters eventually learned about her tendency to dress like a woman. At one point, they found women's clothing in her closet and questioned their mother, thinking Angela had a secret girlfriend. But their

mother, who was aware of Angela's gender dysphoria, told them the truth and life carried on, each member of the family keeping the secret to themselves.

In 1986, Angela's repressed anguish progressed to a point where she began taking Valium, a prescription medication used to treat anxiety and a range of other conditions, before going to work. The tipping point arrived during a particularly complicated situation that highlighted the harshness of the legal profession at that time. A student who had been diagnosed with cancer was struggling to maintain her grades and was about to be failed. At a faculty marks meeting, Angela found the lack of empathy and compassion appalling. She was the only faculty member speaking in the student's favour. This incident, combined with the stress of her gender dysphoria, left her feeling more isolated than ever. Her level of anxiety was unsustainable. Something had to give.

Angela recognized this during a meeting with a friend and former student who had reached out to Angela for advice. Angela expressed her unhappiness, and the friend suggested she speak with a senior partner at Aird & Berlis. Angela sent in her CV, met the hiring committee and was immediately offered a job as research director.

In 1987, Angela took a one-year leave of absence from U of T to work at Aird & Berlis, and the experience offered a welcome change in perspective. When the year was up, the university

agreed to extend the leave for one more year on the condition Angela would return. As the second year ended, however, Angela knew she wasn't going back. She visualized herself back in a university setting, self-medicating just to get through the day. It was not the future she was going to have.

Challenging the status quo was central to Angela's life. Leaving a full professor tenured position at one of Canada's top law schools is not an ideal career move for your average person. But Angela is not average.

“People thought I was crazy,” she acknowledges. “But in my heart, I knew I would regret it if I didn’t stay longer than two years at the firm.”

Two years stretched into 38, and Angela never once regretted the decision, a theme that would continue throughout her life. As her responsibilities at Aird & Berlis evolved, she emerged as Canada's leading authority on contract law. Angela took on high-profile and complex legal cases, and embraced both her educational and advisory roles as counsel to the firm's lawyers across all practice areas. She assisted her colleagues with research and opinions, contract law and statutory interpretation, and consulted with them on many other legal issues. Perhaps most importantly in her

view, and most intangible, was the role of “holding her colleagues’ hands and comforting them.” Kindness always came first for Angela, even amidst her own personal distress.

Angela’s joy in teaching never waned and, in addition to her work at Aird & Berlis, she continued to instruct at Victoria, McGill, Western and Queen’s, and was an adjunct professor at Osgoode Law School from 2003 to 2024. Known for her engaging teaching style and approachable nature, her students adored her as much as she loved to teach. It was a reciprocal relationship, fuelled by Angela’s natural kind-heartedness and desire to see others learn.

A Curious Tension

Angela seemingly had it all: a job she enjoyed and excelled at; supportive colleagues; a loving family. She authored articles and books. Her seminal work, *Canadian Contract Law*, became a foundational text in law schools across Canada and was often cited by the Supreme Court of Canada. The book received the Walter Owen Book Prize in 2006 from the Canadian Bar Association, an honour recognizing excellent legal writing and significant contributions to the evolution of Canadian legal doctrine.

Angela earned respect across the legal community. Judges and counsel relied on her as an expert witness in high-stakes matters, while colleagues and students looked to her for guidance through

case law updates and educational sessions. Her ethical judgment was admired, as she not only upheld the law but pressed for its evolution, challenging questionable decisions and advocating for change where needed.

And, through it all, kindness came first. Angela attracted extraordinarily kind people into her life, perhaps reflecting her own generosity towards others. When Angela married a third time, she was transparent from the start of the relationship about her inner turmoil, and her new spouse was unwaveringly supportive. When Angela's wife died in 2005, she was devastated. Grief works in strange and wondrous ways, sometimes offering unexpected clarity. It was her wife's death that prompted the self-reflection that led Angela to a transformative realization.

Throughout her many years of prioritizing kindness toward others, Angela was not living her truth and, ironically, was being unkind to herself. On the outside, life appeared grand; on the inside, the turmoil raged on. What was she waiting for?

Turning Point

Every transgender person defines what transition looks like for them. For Angela, it meant becoming the person she had always known herself to be. At the age of 68, she chose to begin presenting herself in a way that fully reflected her identity and discovered a life of deep contentment.

“I didn’t worry about it,” Angela says of her decision to live her life openly, with unabashed authenticity. “I didn’t see myself as brave. I was just doing something I desperately wanted to do.”

Once Angela realized that changing her gender was both deeply integral to who she was, and possible, she assumed people would go along with her decision. She was right.

Angela talked to each of her children about her decision to have gender-affirming surgery. She reassured them that absolutely nothing would change regarding her love for them; she would still be their parent and their children’s grandparent. The transition was her personal choice to make.

Angela revealed her true self to the world gradually, through a series of quiet moments rather than one formal announcement. As it turned out, no one was shocked or surprised by the news. Her children were happy to see Angela become her true self and finally live as the person she’d been repressing her entire life.

It was Angela’s openness that allowed the long-held family secret her now-adult twins had been hiding for years to finally come out. The girls confessed how their mother had once confided in them that Angela occasionally enjoyed dressing as a woman. Amused and curious, they had secretly borrowed tights and lipstick from Angela’s drawer when they were teenagers – realizing she wouldn’t say anything. They laughed recalling the

story, and Angela joked about having a fashion deficit because she lacked a lifetime of experience dressing as a woman.

Coming out as transgender in a professional context, Angela sent an email to her Aird & Berlis colleagues announcing that her name would be Angela from then on and she immediately received overwhelming support, easing any apprehension. She was invited to join women's initiatives at the firm and received congratulatory notes of encouragement. Once again, the support reflected Angela's personal values of empathy, compassion and kindness.

For Angela's daughter, Ellen, one of the twins, a major highlight following Angela's transition was the Distinguished Service Award by the Ontario Bar Association in 2016. The nomination, which required only three letters of support, garnered more than 40. Many came from the highest ranks of the law profession, including former Supreme Court of Canada justices, judges, colleagues and deans of law schools. The presentation ceremony highlighted Angela's many contributions to the field, from innovation in legal pedagogy to fearless academic criticism of the Supreme Court's stewardship of Canadian contract law. It was a powerful recognition of both her professional legacy and courageous personal journey.

A Lasting Legacy

Transitioning was monumental for Angela. She embraced both the platform she never expected to have and her lived experience to assist other gender-diverse people. She became a role model and a beacon of hope for others. Alongside sharing her own personal journey, Angela continues to emphasize the importance of compassion over ideology, advocating for safe, supportive environments where individuals can explore and present their identities without fear or restriction.

Angela's advice to other gender diverse people in the legal community? "Go for it. Be yourself. Expect acceptance." She expected acceptance, and she found it. Sound advice for anyone going through a transition and, of course, easier said than done. Angela continues to receive letters of thanks from those experiencing gender dysphoria, as well as their allies and family members.

For the LGBTQ2S+ community, the battle for equity, justice and fairness is ongoing, and education is essential. The consequences of denying care are, in some cases, a matter of life and death. This tension and the ongoing resistance to acceptance can be disheartening and exhausting for many. Angela asks: "I do not understand the reason for this hatred. How do I threaten anyone?"

Ally organizations continue to work toward a more equitable future for transgender people. Allies play a vital role in creating inclusive environments, removing biases and normalizing inclusive

discussions and policies. Allies let people who need support know that there is support and kindness.

Individual allies are important, as well. Angela's daughter Ellen, for one, is passionate about this and discusses Angela's experience every chance she gets to prompt others to examine their expectations. She explains: "Our job is to help create safe spaces where people feel capable and comfortable to be who they are. We need to share stories to normalize it for other people."

Being the daughter of a transgender parent brings a unique lens and deep understanding to the issue of gender identity, Ellen admits, noting that as a society we too often assume that people's expectations and perceptions are the same as our own, and that others need the same things that we do. This is not always true. The concept of "sameness" is exactly what diversity challenges. We need more than one perception at the table. This is how we grow as humans.

Direct, unapologetic and influenced by her pragmatic parent, Ellen's summary of acceptance is something we can strive toward: "Strangers don't need to think about why someone is transgender. They need to accept it and move on, because it has nothing to do with them."

Ellen enjoys educating others, challenging biases and making people think critically about their belief systems. She hopes to help people open their minds, be less afraid to ask questions and refrain from making assumptions.

Swan Song

In June 2025, Angela received her latest distinction – an honorary Doctorate of Laws from York University. In her convocation address, she reminded graduates of the value she held above all else. “I think that the only way forward has to be guided by compassion and kindness; kindness is, after all, the most important human quality.” She concluded, characteristically direct: “Don’t be a scumbag; don’t advise your client to be a scumbag; and try to avoid having a scumbag for a client.”

Angela’s life and work demonstrate that kindness is not a weakness but rather a form of strength. It requires clarity, courage and conviction, especially in the face of fear, doubt or misunderstanding.

Over the course of her distinguished career, Angela shaped generations of students, challenged conventional thinking and brought unmatched insight to the study of contract law in Canada. Her legacy is not limited to doctrine or precedent – it lives in the values she modelled and the people she influenced.

For Angela, kindness was never a slogan. It was a foundation – for personal integrity, professional excellence and lasting impact.

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