

LYNN CONWAY

b. Jan. 2, 1938

COMPUTER PIONEER

*“If you want to change the future,
start living as if you’re already there.”*

**Lynn Conway
is a computer pioneer
and transgender activist
who helped shape the
technology revolution.**

Born male in Mt. Vernon, New York, Lynn Conway is a pioneer in microelectronic chip design and a transgender activist. She helped shape the way modern computers are designed and built.

Conway, formerly Robert Sanders (a pseudonym), enrolled at MIT at 17, but struggled with his gender identity and dropped out. After working as a computer technician, he resumed his education at Columbia University and earned a master’s degree in electrical engineering. He married a woman and fathered two daughters.

Robert’s outstanding record at Columbia attracted the attention of IBM, who recruited him to work on a supercomputing team. Despite his work on a groundbreaking invention, he was fired in 1968 when he began his gender transition.

After learning about the pioneering work of Dr. Harry Benjamin, Robert underwent gender correction surgery. He completed his transition and took the name Lynn Conway. Conway’s ex-wife would not allow her to see their children.

Conway started over in “stealth mode” for fear of being outed and losing her career again.

She advanced quickly. At Xerox Palo Alto Research Center (PARC), she created new methods of silicon chip design and co-wrote a seminal engineering textbook used at universities worldwide. In 1978, on leave as a visiting associate professor at MIT, she invented an e-commerce infrastructure that enabled rapid development of thousands of new chip designs, launching an international revolution in microelectronics and computing.

Conway worked briefly for the Department of Defense before joining the University of Michigan as associate dean of engineering and a professor of electrical engineering and computer science. During this period, she met Charles Rodgers, the man she married.

In 1998, as Conway neared retirement, stories of her innovations at IBM began to circulate. Facing her fear of exposure, she came out on the internet. She created a transgender advocacy website to “illuminate and normalize the issues of gender identity and the processes of gender transition.” She has worked for employment protections for transgender people in the tech industry and successfully lobbied for transgender inclusion in the Institute of Electronic and Electrical Engineers (IEEE) code of ethics.

Conway has received many prestigious awards, including election to the National Academy of Engineering, the profession’s highest honor. In 2004 she was cast in an all-transgender performance of “The Vagina Monologues” and appeared in the documentary “Beautiful Daughters.”

Conway lives with her husband in rural Michigan. They have been together for more than 30 years.



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