

ROBINA ASTI

TRANSGENDER RIGHTS PLAINTIFF

b. April 7, 1921

d. March 21, 2021

“After years of deep reflection, I realized that I was not living my true self.”

She won the legal right to spousal Social Security benefits for widowed transgender people.

Robina Asti was a World War II Navy pilot and the oldest working flight instructor on record. As a 92-year-old transgender woman, she won the legal right to receive her late husband's Social Security benefits — a right previously afforded only to cisgender widows and widowers.

Assigned male at birth, Asti was born in New York City. To pursue her interest in electrical engineering, she attended Brooklyn Technology High School. She dropped out at 17 to join the U.S. Navy.

Asti began her military career installing naval aircraft radios. After the war broke out, she became a pilot, flying reconnaissance missions over the Pacific. She was promoted to test pilot, and by the time she was discharged, Asti was a lieutenant commander.

After the war, Asti returned to New York state, where she opened a restaurant in White Plains with three Navy friends. She soon realized the business didn't suit her, and she joined W. Axe, a mutual fund firm, where she rose to vice president.

In 1958 Asti married a woman, Evangeline Diaz-Perez, and they had four children. In 1976, with the support of Evangeline, Asti left her job and began to transition. After Asti's gender confirmation surgery, the couple agreed to split.

Asti went to work as a makeup artist at Bloomingdales. She served as chairperson of the Hudson Valley chapter of the Ninety-Nines, an organization for female pilots, and taught flying lessons. She soon discovered that, as a woman, she was required to undergo an internal exam as part of the annual physical needed to renew her pilot's license. With the Ninety-Nines, she successfully petitioned the government to end the rule.

Asti met an artist, Norwood Patten, and they married in 2004. After Patten died in 2012, Asti applied for his Social Security benefits. Because she was transgender, the government denied her application. With the help of Lambda Legal, Asti successfully challenged the rule in court, winning transgender people nationwide the right to collect their deceased spouse's benefits.

Asti emerged herself in LGBTQ activism after a film about her case, “Flying Solo: A Transgender Widow Fights Discrimination,” was released in 2015. She gave TED Talks and, with her grandson, founded the Cloud Dancers Foundation in 2019 — an advocacy organization for elder trans people.

In 2020, Guinness World Records recognized Asti, at age 99, as the oldest active pilot and the oldest active flight instructor. Out Magazine named her among its 100 LGBTQ+ Individuals of the Year.

Asti died shortly before her 100th birthday. The New York Times published her obituary.

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