Transgender people

Caitlyn Jenner keeping up

Steinfield, that gloriously layered, expertly crafted ‘90s sitcom, was often called a “show about nothing” — which seems quaint now, in the current era of reality TV.

Among today’s endless reality drama series, the incredible lack of actual drama (or comedy, or decent dialogue, or anything really) is overwhelming. Keeping Up with the Kardashians, now in its 10th season, has long since perfected and epitomised this genre, stringing out long episodes with confected crises, stilted “heartfelt” conversations, endless pouting and preening and robotic monologues from the wealthy Californian clan.

It’s ironic then that this tedious show about nothing has now contributed a whole lot of something to a public discussion about a serious human rights issue, thanks to the decision by Caitlyn Jenner to share her truth.

Jenner is now probably the highest-profile transgender person in the world, and her actions have been lauded as a game-changer in transforming attitudes and promoting understanding and acceptance of a highly marginalised group of people.

During her landmark interview with Diane Sawyer in April, she herself noted the irony of keeping perhaps the most worthy and interesting story the family had to tell hidden all those years: “We’d done 426 episodes over almost eight years now and the entire run I kept thinking to myself, ‘Oh my God, this whole thing, the one real

true story in the family, was the one I was hiding and nobody knew about.’”

Though Jenner had been an American celebrity for years, capturing the nation’s heart and a gold medal at the 1976 Olympics, it was her role as beleaguered patriarch of reality television’s first family that thrust her back into the spotlight and gave her current transition the prominence it has today.

She has used this to explain what it feels like to be trans, the difference between gender identity and sexual preference, and other issues that many people might not have come across or have gained insight into.

She has raised awareness of the more serious struggles many transgender people go through, including depression and suicidal thoughts. Up to half of transgender people have attempted suicide in their life, according to the National LGBTI Health Alliance, and this is an issue Jenner says she will focus on in her new spin-off reality series, which will document her transition.

Jenner’s glamorous Vanity Fair cover this week was an internet sensation, sparking renewed interest in her story. Though her stunning appearance was a major focus of the attention, the cover also prompted discussion about her relative privilege in the trans community.

She is someone who can afford facial feminisation surgery and has access to the clothing and make-up artists that have allowed her to embody this archetypal standard of feminine beauty, as well as to live with financial security and personal safety.

“Most trans folks don’t have the privileges Caitlyn and I have now have,” transgender actress and star of Orange Is The New Black Laverne Cox wrote on Tumblr.

In Australia, that message was being shared too, even as her visibility was welcomed.

“Whilst Caitlyn has access to support and money, a lot of trans people in Australia and elsewhere don’t, and for seniors, who have struggled for 65 years and have a lot of built-up emotion, it can be still very difficult,” said Sally Goldner, executive director of Transgender Victoria.

“So it’s really important that people like Caitlyn tell their story and give prominence so other people can join in on the conversation.”

According to a major 2011 study, 57 per cent of transgender Americans experienced rejection by members of their family, with 19 per cent experiencing violence from a family member. Those who were rejected by their families were at higher risk of suicide or homelessness.

The onus is on us, who have admired her courage, to now uphold the rights and improve the safety and wellbeing of others like her. After hundreds of hours of broadcasting tedious “reality”, Caitlyn Jenner living her truth will hopefully prove enlightening for us all.