

## **SPEECH: The Third International Conference on Transgender Law and Employment Policy - TRANSGEN '94**

I'd like to thank Phyllis Frye for the honor of addressing you this evening and now for the standard lawyer-type disclosures. I don't like being spoken at, so I'm going to try to avoid doing that this evening. My goal is to discuss a variety of topics with openness and diversity, I can only speak from my perspective. Although I am representing the FTM community on this occasion, the opinions that I express are my own and reflect on no one but myself. In a typical conversation, it is easy to explain either broad generalities or narrow statements. A speech, being one-sided, is devoid of that opportunity. For the most part, I will be making broad generalizations.

I have been asked to discuss the FTM perspective. As we run the gambit of human existence, coming from all walks of life, races, sexual orientations and spiritualities, you can see what a difficult and broad topic this is. Some of us prefer to be called FTM while others prefer the term "transgendered". Some of us are homosexual, some bisexual, some heterosexual, and in some cases we are asexual. Some of us require strict adherence to the "proper" gender pronouns. Some could care less. Some believe that we are strictly male and there is no room for anything else in us. Some believe that we are all of both and neither of either, a walking contradiction, a third gender so to speak.

We are pioneers in our own fashion, navigating the waters of a turbulent bipolar society, where you are forced to choose the gender box in which you will reside. In a sense, women have an advantage over men. There is broader latitude when it comes to the expression of emotions. Women are able to express emotion without stigma. They touch each other from time to time. They are able to hug when they meet and preserve their semblance of sexual identity. There are no hushed whispers of "lesbos". No one will look twice at elderly matrons dancing at a wedding together. The feeling of "oh, how cute," implodes immediately when the same situation arises involving two men. Women also experience a greater latitude in the choice of clothing. For the most part, no one will think twice about a woman buying a man's shirt, but a man in the lingerie department is outrageous, whether or not he is there to shop for his girlfriend, wife, or mistress.

Ask any MTF about her first experience purchasing clothing or accessories during her initial transition. The muted comments, stares, and murmurs of disapproval, rudely loud enough to hear but not brazen enough to be clearly asserted. Whereas for the majority of us FTMs, the experience was, "What can I do for you, young man? Will you be using your mother's credit card or your own?"

What we tend to forget is that for every freedom there is a cost. To a greater degree there are disadvantages for women such as lower wages, discrimination, clothing and accessories are more expensive and less durable, and there is also the added fear of your own personal safety when walking down the street.

I practiced law as a woman for four years. During that time, I was required to wear pantyhose, heels, a business suit or skirt and a blouse to work every day, just in case I had to go to court in an emergency. That emergency never arose. I noticed that I

was replacing 3 to 4 pairs of shoes every 6 months. It was more expensive to launder my blouses and digressing from the point, has anybody been able to figure out why women's blouses cost more than men's shirts to launder? They use the same soap, same washing machine, the same press. For the most part, women don't ask for starch. It's the same material, often of smaller dimensions. It seems to me that women's blouses should cost less to launder than men's shirts. Generally my lady suits lasted a couple of years before they started falling apart. Pantyhose purchases had a life unto themselves. Inevitably, I ruined a pair every three days, that is, if I was lucky.

As a man, my suits are more expensive, but have lasted far longer. My shirts cost less to launder. My shoes have not yet needed to be resoled. In short, I am spending less money for more durable goods. I don't buy the argument that women are more fashion conscious and that their clothes are made with that in mind. I have known men who are far greater clothes horses and could care less that fashion changes. They just go out and buy the current threads.

The price paid by men for their relative freedoms is a rigid code of behavior. Real men don't cry, don't eat quiche, and certainly don't discuss anything which could be perceived as a sign of weakness by their so-called brothers. Male bonding consists of slapping each other on the back and making off-color jokes to hide the fact that they even touched. God help you if that hello hug is not accompanied by a couple of hearty slaps. By this little ritual, they are able to avoid any specter of homosexuality. What is absolutely bizarre about all of this is that a sexually aroused male can, within reason, be convinced to try something that smacks of homoeroticism. Women are far more circumspect when it comes to crossing this line, yet they are freer with their affections.

I believe that little by little the stereotypical role model of what is appropriate behavior is changing. With the advent of the men's movement there is some progress being made in this regard. More opportunities are becoming available for men have the opportunity to discuss what ails them without being pounded into the sand for being a "sissy" or weak. The struggle for women is still being fought slowly and painstakingly. There is no forward motion to terminate the wage or other disparities which exist.

As transgendered individuals, we have had the opportunity of experiencing both sides of the fence. Whether FTM's choose to acknowledge it or not, we did walk on this earth being perceived as women in some way, shape or form. As such we have experienced discrimination, whether obvious or overt. We can and should help change this world and this society by not falling into the macho-man, back slapping, tobacco spitting, beer guzzling syndrome. We can and should speak out when women are being demeaned or marginalized. We can and should refuse to out spit, out piss, or out screw our biological male counter parts. We have the ability to disagree with the opinions of other men without being less manly or of being discovered.

We must keep in mind that our way is not always right for someone else and that for every opinion that we have there is someone with a contrary one, each one based on a different set of experiences and with its own validity. Instead of getting angry, invalidating the opinions or beliefs of others, and inflaming passions on both sides, we need to take a deep breath and hear each other out and in the worst-case scenario, agree to disagree. We must each walk the path of our own choice whether it

be straight, narrow, curvy or up hill at a 90 degree angle. We can cry, and laugh, and talk about our fears with at least one person, whether it be a friend, lover or a member of our community. For those of us who are less fortunate, with a therapist or in the modern age by plugging into cyberspace.

In a sense we are gender outlaws forging a new frontier. The absence of clearly defined transgender role models permits us to define who we are, who we sleep with and whom we love. We get to decide what behaviors are acceptable for us so long as we spew the appropriate catch phrases to the medical providers who have the power to stop us in our tracks. By the same token, the lack of role models results in the lack of a frame of reference within which to work. We have more options than we did in the '40s and '50s. We should avail ourselves of these freedoms and benefits. How, you ask? By coming out.

I can see the sweat beading on many faces when I used that phrase.

What does coming out mean?

The first closet that I subsisted in was as a lesbian. I had my doubts about my sexuality and called a high school friend who had come out during our senior year. I asked her if she thought that I was a dyke. She laughed and basically told me that only by sleeping with women would I be able to answer that question for myself. Well, at the time that advice was the most aggravating and frustrating thing that I had ever heard, I later realized that she was teaching me one of the most important lessons that I could ever learn. It was what I thought and felt that was important. To live my life by anyone else's standard would doom any happiness that I could ever hope to achieve.

In short order, I followed her advice. I proceeded to jump out of the closet, boldly asserted to the world who I was in my best Ethel Merman voice and proceeded to slam the door shut so hard and fast that it shattered in splinters behind me. What can I say? Youth is wasted on the young. I was working at a prestigious law firm in Beverly Hills at the time, and wouldn't you know it, not only did they fail to offer me a job after passing the bar exam, they tried to fire me 30 days before it. The fact that I was working 60 hours a week on a salary with no overtime pay or comp time and going to school at night conveniently slipped their minds. Fortunately I convinced them to let me stay until my results came in. It was at this time that I realized that the splinters from the shattered closet door were lodged in the back of my head. Needless to say, I had them painstakingly removed. I knew in my heart that I had and was being discriminated against, but could never prove it. That experience taught me caution if nothing else.

So why am I here, even suggesting that you come out? Because you can make the difference for all of us. No one is suggesting that you wear a sign stating that you are transgendered. You don't have to leap out of the closet or even come out for very long. You don't even have to turn on the light if you don't want to, just start by opening the door. If and when you feel comfortable, stick your head out and look around. If you need to go back in and close the door, then fine, do that. You have the right to do whatever makes you feel comfortable. At least you got a little fresh air.

For the most part, people tend to view coming out as an extreme process. The image of a deer frozen and thereby trapped in the lights of an oncoming car comes to mind. If you want it to be this way it can, but it does not have to. By starting the road to transition, you have in essence come out to yourself. This is the first step. If you have started taking hormones you have come out to your medical providers. If you have had to go to the Department of Motor Vehicles to change the gender on your driver's license you have come out to them too. The point that I am trying to make is that every day that we live and breathe we come out to some degree.

Paul Monet, a gay writer, said "When you finally come out, there is a pain that stops, and you know that it will never hurt like that again, no matter how bad you lose or how bad you die." But coming out is not the end all and be all to happiness. No one is suggesting that you will be teleported to a Disneyesque setting where birds chirp all the live-long day and the "bad guys" never win. Quite the contrary. There is vulnerability and associated risks. But what are the options if you stay in the closet? Closets are musty and reek of fear -- the fear of discovery and of humiliation -- of fear for our personal safety in the world. Whether or not we choose to see it, the closet communicates to others that we are ashamed of who we are or who we once were.

So, you see, closets portray an illusion of safety, but in actuality they are not safe at all. There is no lock on the door. People who want to hurt us either physically or emotionally can smell that fear and sense that shame. By being out, the impression that we have no fear is conveyed, whether it is true or not. I can illustrate this perfectly. I would surmise that at least a majority of you think or have at some point since I started this speech, concluded that I have no fear of public speaking. This impression is totally false. See, you too can fool the world to a certain degree.

In this day and age with the Religious Right closing in around us, we cannot wait for the world to change so that we are accepted. We must take some form of affirmative action to change it. I have permission from the author to read you the following passage. It was written by S. Gardner:

"I was waiting patiently for 39 years then I got tired of waiting. Ten years ago, I would never have dreamed of sharing my thoughts on this subject with even my closest family members, let alone total strangers. I would never have dreamed of being so bold as to openly buy my own skirts and blouses in stores. Now I know I can't wait for society. I have to take some small action myself. We all do. We all have to do what we can to help ourselves and to help others to have the courage to change society's perceptions of men and women.

When I began to question my own situation with respect to my gender and my role, the thing that really haunted me was not my own pain (which was nevertheless real) but instead my complicity with the infliction of pain on others. If I didn't start to make some minor moves to help move the rock off our chests, how could I look in the mirror? Then I read Signorile's "Queer in America" and realized how far ahead the non-transgendered gay movement is and how much happier life is for gays now than it was in the fifties when I was born. I realized how much life has changed for gays and I saw how much it

could change for us if we only began the small steps now that will lead to major change in a few years.

I vowed to never answer any questions about my transgendered status with a lie. Ever. I wouldn't rub anyone's nose (yet) in my gender but won't lie now either. It was a very liberating experience, and the joy continues. Everyday I get a little bolder about letting others know who I am and why, and that makes me feel so relieved. Closets kill and closets make other closets. I realize now that I am not the only one in my closet. My closet also helps imprison others in their closets and every crack I hack from my own closet door lets light into a million other closets."

I could not have said this better.

We cannot sit back and rely on the talk shows to portray us in a favorable or appropriate light. While it is good that we are garnering greater visibility through the media, the media cannot be trusted. Their goal is different than ours. We are not concerned about how many papers get sold or what the ratings are. What does concern us is that we do not have the same basic inalienable rights and freedoms that others enjoy. We are not free from discrimination in housing, in employment, or any facet of lives. This is slowly changing. We want to be treated with the same level of decency and respect as anyone else, not like a bunch of sideshow freaks.

If we sit back and wait for it to happen, our persecution will continue and more than likely increase. There is a famous quote by Martin Niemöller:

"In Germany, they came first for the communists and I did not speak up because I was not a communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak up because I was not a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak up because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics and I did not speak up because I was Protestant. When they came for me, there was no one left to speak up."

What that sentiment illustrates to me, that not only do we have a duty to get involved, but that we can not rely on others to speak out for us or to protect us. We cannot solely rely on the gay, lesbian and/or bisexual communities to do our work for us when they are busy ostracizing their own because of a purported "negative image". This includes drag queens, cross-dressers, transgendered individuals, and anyone not in line with the Izod shirt, Banana Republic chino pant, penny loafer, Wonder Bread image. While a faction of the gay community is willing to embrace us with open arms, a very vocal faction of that community would like us to bury our heads in the sand. We are told to wait by the sidelines while they garner support and gain acceptance. Then and only then should we step in. I don't trust this any more than someone who starts their sentence with the word "honestly," and then expects me to believe the remainder of whatever it is that they are trying to tell me.

It has taken the gay and lesbian community 25 years to even get close to legal protection. If we agree to wait by the sidelines, it will take much longer than 25 years

to get anywhere even close to where they are today.

By coming out, whether globally or on an individual basis, we touch people's lives. By being honest and open about ourselves, we educate others that we are no different from them, irrespective of our unique qualities. It is easier to disparage and destroy that which is not close to you. In other words, distance and dehumanization make us easier to obliterate and therefore constitutes the greater threat to our existence.

I used to believe that being political activism meant going out on a limb. That politics involved long meetings, with lots of arguments, and nothing being accomplished. Of promises made and broken only to be resolved with a lot of last minute scrambling by the same few people to get the conference or newsletter or event together in time for the deadline. That politics involved a lot of pain and sacrifice. I deluded myself into believing that because I no longer do any of those things, I am not political. Fortunately, someone with a very large needle burst that bubble. Talking to people is political in nature. Telling someone your story or aspects of your journey in transitioning is political. Every time that we stand up in front somebody and say "Hey, this is what life is about for me," we are being political. This work, in addition to all of the other work, must be done. We must find our own niches and ways to help and be supportive of our fight for civil rights.

You can get involved without coming out. You don't have to be transgendered to write your congressperson or senator. You can write an article anonymously and present it for publication to Tapestry, Chrysalis, FTM or any other publications that are out there. You can write anonymous letters to the editor. If these things prove too disconcerting for you, you can stuff mailing envelopes, donate money, or time to one of our organizations. If this minimal level of interaction makes you uncomfortable, you can post your thoughts, opinions, or advice to others on the Internet and in that fashion make it easier for someone else to transition, cross dress, come out, or start thinking about us in a different light.

There presently exists a rift between MTF and FTM communities. This is not due to transgressions or bad blood. The rift is gradually becoming smaller, but exists nonetheless. I believe that this stems in part from the bipolar nature of the society in which we live. The world forces you to choose what box you will live in--male or female. There are only two spaces available on motor vehicle forms, credit applications, insurance forms, medical histories and the like. There is no box marked "other," "both," or "neither." Even in our own community, gender ambiguity is a no-no. It's no wonder that we are persecuted. We make people uncomfortable. This is another reason why talking to other people is imperative.

In essence, transition involves a rejection of the prior self both overtly and subliminally. This is further compounded by that ever familiar pre-op body image discomfort. I have known FTM's who have said, "Why would anyone want to be female? The pantyhose, the makeup, the dreaded heels, the pressure to be feminine!" This isn't fun. There are also MTF's who have expressed that testosterone is poison and all men are worms.

While I have no desire whatsoever to be feminine, I can not deny that the look of a feminine woman is --well--more than just appealing. Without invoking my 5th amendment rights, I freely and voluntarily admit that a shapely pair of legs particularly in black stockings can render me speechless on the spot. Fortunately, there are a lot of table cloths in this place which have enabled me to speak tonight. My desire to be masculine does not preclude my appreciation of femininity.

Also, I have noticed a trend among FTMs to leave the community after they have completed transition. I myself, although still in transition, have not been around at all this past year. This is not a slight. If it weren't for the few FTMs who have stayed and heard the same questions and dilemmas a million times, I would not be here before you tonight.

MTF's on the other hand tend to stick around, continuing to get and give support. I have not quite figured out why this is. Part of it may be that MTFs have more information to absorb than we do. Let's face it, learning how to knot a tie is much less difficult than to apply makeup properly or trying to walk in heels. I have tried to walk in heels before and can tell you that its an art form that I never was able to master.

The fact that there are fewer FTMs around to interact with each other also means that there are less of us around to interact with MTFs. I have no clear solution as to how to narrow the rift. Conferences such as this one and IFGE provide a place and opportunity for us to interact and work toward a common goal.

I'm not sure whether I covered FTM perspective or not. I understand that it is usual to tell the audience about yourself at the beginning so that they will know who you are and what you are about. I did not do this. I wanted you to listen to my words without an impression of my background, except for the basics of course. I wanted you to listen with open ears and open minds.

I am an attorney. I practice law in San Francisco. I was born in Cuba and you can imagine the dismay that my parents had when I boldly announced to them that in addition to being their daughter I hoped some day to be there son. This was after a year on hormones and many excused as to that cold I had. When I finally met my parents with a full beard and a crew cut and a partner with earrings and tattoos and hair longer than mine, who was very clearly male, you can imagine their shock. My mother's jaw dropped to the ground and I don't think that she recovered the ability to speak for 20 minutes. But during that period of time, the mention of my female name continued throughout the evening. While my mother is trying to be better about my name, she still flubs up every once in awhile and calls me she. I haven't bothered correcting her. I merely informed her that if this ever happened in public, I would do the "sorry, my mother's a little crazy, we need to get her back to the home for her med" routine. She's gotten much better about it since then.

In closing, I would like to say life is too bloody short. If it feels good and is right in your heart, DO IT. Don't live for work. Work that you may live.

[Thank yous omitted]

- July, 1994

By Michael M. Hernandez  
Delivered 8/19/94  
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