

local news

Stirring the waters

*A local chapter of the national trans-rights group
It's Time, America! debuts to discord*

by Inga Sorensen

What we want to do is work with existing trans groups. We're not here to replace anyone's membership in other organizations," says Lori Buckwalter, founder and director of It's Time, Oregon!, a fledgling organization whose goal in part is to "focus on [the] legislative, legal and civil rights effort for transgendered people...[and] offer for the first time a direct credible link from Oregon to a national coalition of transgender advocacy groups."

Buckwalter, 46, is a preoperative transsexual who has undergone hormonal therapy for nearly a year and hopes to have gender-reassignment surgery in early 1997.

She says she got the idea for ITO after speaking with Jessica Xavier, founder of It's Time, America!, which was established in August 1994 as a grass-roots political action organization for the transgender community. ITA is currently forming chapters throughout the country.

Buckwalter got a chance to chat with Xavier in October when she was in Oregon for a speaking engagement.

"I spoke with her about many issues involving the community," says Buckwalter. "Jessica is one of the best grass-roots organizers in the country.... After speaking with her I decided to start a chapter here."

Buckwalter is currently working to pull together a board, which she hopes will include representatives from a diversity of communities.

She says ITO will work in association with ITA and the Gender Public Advocacy Coalition (GenderPAC), a communitywide association that includes several trans groups "dedicated to working on issues of gender, affectional and racial discrimination at a national level."

"The first issue I hope to address is trans violence. This is a common issue for all of us, no matter our beliefs on other matters," she says. "I would like to see us promote a survey on trans violence."

The compiled data, says Buckwalter, would be presented to relevant parties, including lawmakers and other public servants.

Additionally ITO will advocate for the passage of statewide and federal antidiscrimination legislation that is inclusive of transgendered people.

A battle was fought between some trans-rights supporters and national gay and lesbian groups earlier this year over inclusion of trans people in the Employment Non-Discrimination Act, federal legislation which sought to bar employment discrimination based on sexual orientation.

The bill, which was ultimately defeated by one vote, did not include trans coverage.

Perhaps the most controversial matter Buckwalter says ITO will take a position on is the one involving gender identity disorder, which is listed in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, published by the American Psychiatric Association.

For transsexual adults, a GID diagnosis is usually necessary to get hormones and surgeries or to get reimbursed for transition-related care. GID has also been used to gain antidiscrimination protections for transgendered people in some jurisdictions, under the aegis of laws prohibiting discrimination against people with psychiatric disabilities. In October, the Oregon Bureau of Labor and

Industries reversed years of policy and began accepting complaints from transsexuals who claim discrimination because of their status as transsexuals.

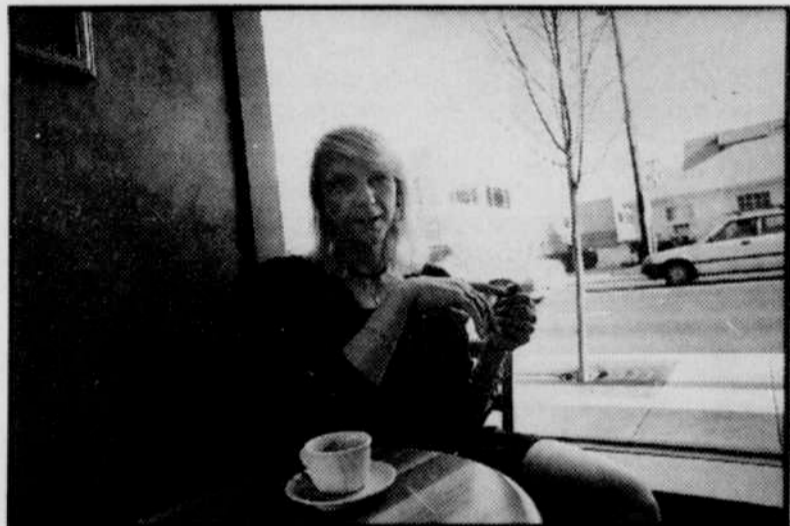
BOLI said that transsexualism must be considered a protected disability under Oregon law.

While heralded by some, however, critics say a GID diagnosis perpetuates the stereotype that transgendered people are inherently disturbed or unstable. That perception, they say, only hurts the overall trans-rights movement.

GID diagnosis critics also say a growing number of jurisdictions are prohibiting discrimination against transgendered people without reference to GID. Those places include San Francisco, Santa Cruz, Calif., Seattle, Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minn.

They say the trend marks the beginning of a new era in transgendered civil rights, one which has the potential to move beyond the disability model to a more comprehensive civil rights agenda.

Buckwalter says ITO will likely advocate for a more "ordered shift from the strictly psychiatric diagnosis toward one that recognizes more physiological and medical factors."



Lori Buckwalter

"But our agenda really is to network. There are other organizations in Oregon that serve the trans community, but they haven't networked."

Margaret Deirdre O'Hartigan, a longtime transsexual rights activist, questions whether ITO is necessary: "When I talk to well-known trans activists here, their immediate response is, 'What do we need ITO for?' There already is a long history of trans activism here in Oregon."

O'Hartigan and other trans activists criticize ITO's association with GenderPAC, because some believe the latter is endorsing the elimination of a GID diagnosis in trans youth, "the effect of which will be the loss of all civil rights protections in the State of Oregon for trans youth as well as the loss of medically appropriate treatment for our youth."

While O'Hartigan says she will not actively oppose ITO, "that doesn't mean I won't oppose their proposal."

"We will not tolerate an attack on our diagnosis," she says.

O'Hartigan further believes it is counterproductive to lobby for trans-inclusive antidiscrimination legislation in Oregon in light of BOLI's recent action.

"We already have statewide protections. It would be redundant to push for trans coverage," she says. "We should not alienate gays and lesbians.... We don't need to be included in the bill. What we should be doing is working to pass a bill that protects them."

She adds that she fears lobbying lawmakers may only bring more attention to the fact that transsexuals do have some protections, "and [legislators] might try and take that away."

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