

Domestic violence and transsexuals: While some might think of the topic in sensational terms, spend an afternoon listening to Diana Courvant share her personal testimony, and the issue takes on a decidedly more serious tone.

According to the 29-year-old Portlander, those who do not fall into society's prescribed definitions of gender encounter unreasonable difficulties when seeking assistance in the domestic violence arena.

"These are the people who are caught in the middle of a system that doesn't really know how to address their needs," says Courvant, who speaks not only from her years of researching and speaking on the topic, but from personal experience as well.

In the early 1990s, she spent nearly two years in a relationship she says was both physically and emotionally abusive. Prior to her gender transition, Courvant was abused, as a man, by her female partner.

The abuse, she says, included having money stolen by her partner, being threatened with physical violence and being strangled nearly to the point of passing out.

It was after that relationship ended that Courvant began her transition from male to female, and it was during the transition that she began confronting the scars she had acquired from the abusive relationship.

"That was when I unburied myself, right in the middle of my transition," she says, noting she had to simultaneously come out as a woman and a lesbian.

As if processing abuse issues isn't overwhelming enough, insert into the equation the transition from one gender to another, mix in just a touch of what Courvant describes as an effort by Portland's domestic violence shelters to "gender purify," and you've got quite a situation on your hands.

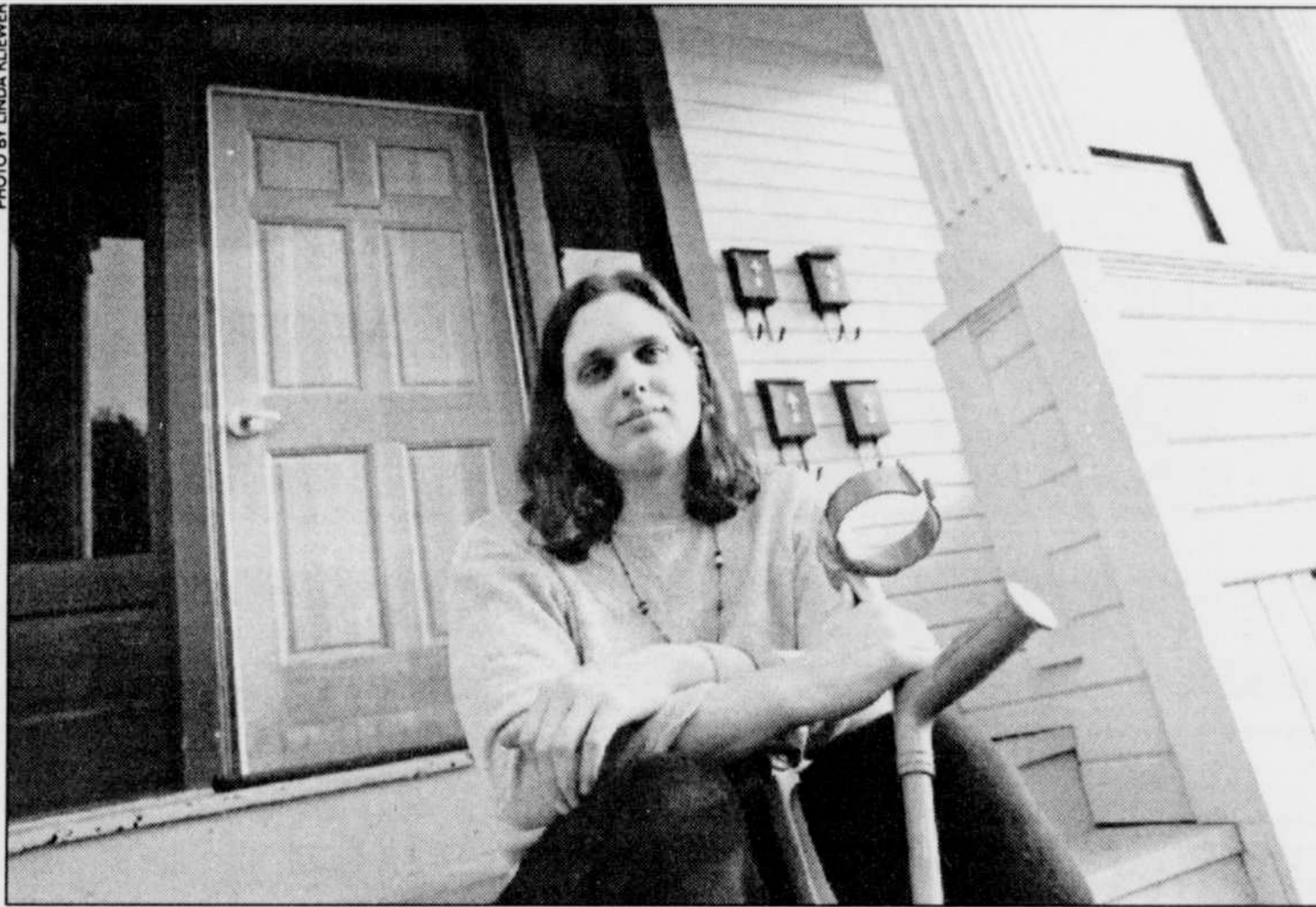
"When you set the dialogue for abuse issues within the parameters of traditional gender identity, it leaves those of us who don't fit strictly male or female guidelines totally out in the cold," she says.

"Shelters don't want to expose other clients to something upsetting or shocking. At the shelters there's a pressure to normalize. There's the idea that heterosexual women who have been abused will become very uncomfortable if they're around men"—even if those men used to be women, Courvant says. Or vice versa.

For people who define gender as strictly male or female, the scenarios Courvant references may seem overwhelming. Men who were abused by women and then transitioned to female, for example. Or women who have transitioned to men but were abused as women by their male or female partners.

SURVIVAL GUIDE

The Survivor Project, brainchild of a Portland activist, assists trans and intersexed people escaping domestic violence by Patrick Collins



Diana Courvant

Courvant is adamant about speaking out not only for transsexuals caught in the horrific trap of domestic violence, but also for those whom she calls intersexed, a condition she says is far more prevalent than most people realize. (According to a May 1997 *Newsweek* report, one in 2,000 births is a child whose genitals are deemed neither male nor female.)

These issues prompted Courvant to organize the Survivor Project, a group that champions the concerns of trans and intersexed individuals confronting domestic violence issues. She has become a frequent speaker at symposiums and trainings for those providing domestic violence services.

According to Courvant, national movements are currently underway for domestic violence survivors, as well as for trans and intersexed people.

"The Survivor Project is at the intersection of the two movements," she says.

At that intersection, Courvant and her group conduct research and provide support to individuals and agencies struggling with domestic violence and gender issues.

Craig Smith, who conducts outreach for the Portland Women's Crisis Line, underscores the importance of Courvant's research.

"It's hard to pin down the numbers for domestic violence among gay and lesbian couples, and within that scheme it's even more difficult to get numbers for the situation with [trans] people," he says. "There's not exactly an abundance of funding being put toward examining same-sex relationships."

There's even less, he adds, when it comes to relationships involving trans people. But there's no reason, Smith says, to believe domestic violence occurs less frequently among couples who are anything other than heterosexual.

Connie Burk, executive director of Seattle's Advocates for Abused and Battered Lesbians, says that, according to a 1991 study, 46 percent of the lesbian relationships surveyed experienced two or more incidents of domestic violence.

"Given that, there's certainly domestic violence in the trans community," she says.

Burk says the problem of accessing services is further complicated for trans people by the rigid-

ity imposed not only by service providers, but by society at large.

"For a number of reasons, many of them rooted in homophobia, queers don't view domestic violence services as accessible to them," she says. "For trans people, they find themselves forced into prescribed gender categories."

Regardless of one's gender, or even one's sexual orientation, the quantity of domestic violence shelters and services appears deficient. In the Portland area, for example, it has been estimated there are just 85 to 95 beds available for women and children escaping abuse from men.

Erika Silver, executive director of Bradley-Angle House in Portland, says that domestic violence cuts evenly across nearly all lines.

"I'm sure there's a need for these services among transgendered and transsexual people," she says. "We try to practice social change as well as social service. Last fall, we had an in-service [training] for all staff on the issue of domestic violence in the trans community."

Bradley-Angle House has a temporary policy in place which offers postoperative male-to-female clients a full range of services, including shelter. For the

pre- and midoperative, however, the agency provides case management and issues motel vouchers.

There are many reasons for these procedures, Silver says. First is the safety of the client, but also on the list is the fact that seeing male body parts may make other shelter clients uncomfortable.

"I'm not entirely comfortable with that," she admits, "but, according to the FBI, 95 percent of this sort of violence is perpetrated by men against women."

Silver says she and a committee are carefully considering the implications to all of Bradley-Angle's seven programs before the agency formulates a permanent policy.

Burk, meanwhile, says: "Mainstream programs need to be held accountable for all survivors. We need to build on the grass-roots movement in our community and broaden ourselves."

■ For more information, call the SURVIVOR PROJECT at 288-3191.

HIV DAY CENTER

Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon

New Location: 8610 SW 17th Ave., Portland

New Phone #: (503) 244-9930

Food/Services...

- Hot and Cold Breakfast and Lunch
- Showers, Laundry, Nutritional Assessments
- Chiropractor, Massage Therapist, Body Compositions
- YMCA, Food Bank, Emergency Clothing

& Groups

- HIV Support
- One Year to LIVE
- Recovery/Self-Cure
- Bill Moyer's Addiction Videos
- Spiritual Issues
- Art Group

THE COMMUNITY'S HOME LOAN RESOURCE...

Office
297-9900

Evenings/Weekends
780-1561

- New purchase
- 100% equity loans
- Pre-qualification by phone or fax
- Refinance/cash out
- Pre-approved loans
- Residential, commercial & investment property
- Appointments at your convenience



Colleen Weed

MORTGAGE Advocates

"I'm available when you are!"

9900 S.W. Wilshire Street • Portland, Oregon 97225