

A group of trans activists will conduct a 90-minute "Symposium on Gender Identity" for state legislators and their staffs May 9 in Salem.

"As far as we know, this is the first time that a state organization...has developed a symposium or a panel specifically for legislators," says Melissa Shepherd, Basic Rights Oregon program coordinator.

Formal invitations to the breakfast meeting were issued April 24. At least 17 legislators have confirmed their attendance so far.

BRO has introduced two bills this legislative session. Senate Bill 786 bans discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity in employment, housing, public accommodation, public assistance and education. SB 816 adds gender identity to the state's hate crimes law, which already includes sexual orientation.

The hate crimes bill also has been introduced as House Bill 3356. The House Judiciary Committee took testimony from nine supporters during a hearing April 23.

The panel was planned after some of BRO's strongest allies in the Legislature indicated they needed more education on these issues, especially regarding proper language use.

"I'm excited that there are legislators who asked us to put a symposium on," says Jennifer, a member of BRO's Trans Advisory Group who requested that her last name not be used. "There are a lot of legislators out there who have been friendly for some time toward gay and lesbian issues. But gender identity is pretty new to most of them."

During the symposium, advisory group members will introduce working definitions of terms such as "transgendered." Portlander Kaelin Bowers, 37, will explain the difference between "gender identity" (who you are) and "sexual orientation" (who you are attracted to).

He says the event's "overall purpose is to educate legislators about what gender identity is and to help them understand that everybody has a gender identity and everybody should be able to express that without fear of their lives, their jobs and where they live."

After the review of definitions, the group will play host to an extended question-and-answer session. "I don't know how many questions there will be," Jennifer comments. "I would be encouraged if there were more questions rather than fewer."

Advisory group members conducted a similar seminar for BRO's staff and board of directors last fall. With a different audience in mind, they have adjusted that program, practiced making presentations and prepared handouts.

"It's a monumental thing that the legislators have asked for this information and want to be

TRANSLATION

Lawmakers learn language lesson on gender identity

by John R. Oshin

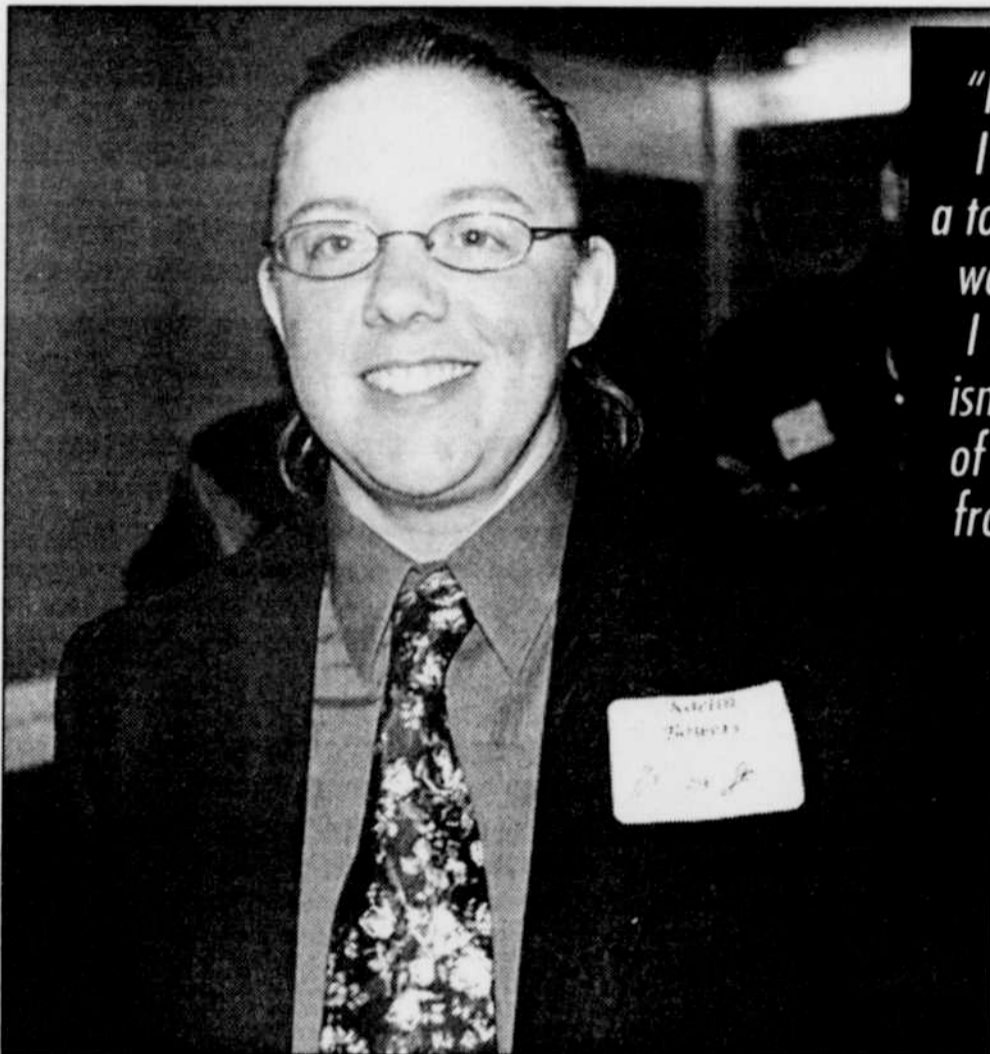


PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS

"I have to be aware of how I dress if I'm going to visit a town in rural Oregon. I won't wear my suit there, because I don't feel safe. And there isn't really anything in terms of law that would protect me from that, as it stands now."

—Kaelin Bowers

safe. And there isn't really anything in terms of law that would protect me from that, as it stands now."

Jennifer's assumed gender identity at birth was male, and she lived as male for 30 years.

stronger allies," Shepherd observes. "It's exciting that we have a Trans Advisory Group that is capable of presenting this information, that is so involved in this process that we can do it successfully."

Bowers hopes the legislators will understand the urgency of protecting trans people in Oregon. His assumed gender identity at birth was female, and he is now taking hormones and has thought about surgery.

"At this point I think my gender identity is male," he explains. "How I express that is changing, and how people are perceiving my gender identity is changing."

Bowers has a supportive work environment at Intel, and he owns his own house. In other areas, he has experienced some "low level" discrimination during this transition. He is particularly interested in seeing gender identity added to the hate crimes law, as a matter of personal safety when he ventures away from the Portland area.

"I have to be aware of how I dress if I'm going to visit a town in rural Oregon," he says. "I won't wear my suit there, because I don't feel

"I knew that I wasn't happy with my gender from the time I was about 6," she explains. "I was completely ignorant about the possibility of transitioning until I was maybe 28 or 29.... By the time I was 30, I did it."

Now 33, she has had a number of surgeries and considers herself a "masculine female."

"I currently identify as transgendered," she continues. "Transgendered" to me implies that there is still some ambiguity about my gender, whereas 'transsexual' would say that I was the opposite of the gender I was assumed to be at birth."

Jennifer owns her own house but lives and works in a town with no legal protections based on gender identity. When she came out as trans to her boss, he was supportive, but issues still arose about her use of the bathroom at work.

"I had a little conference with the women in the office when I decided I was going to transition," she explains. "I told them what was going on, what it meant to me. I told them I needed to use the women's room, and I hoped that there was some way we could work that out."

When one person objected, Jennifer's boss

asked her to continue to use the men's room. "That day I was unprepared to fight, so I said OK," she observes. "But by the time I got home I knew I couldn't use the men's room anymore."

So for two months, Jennifer didn't use any bathroom at work. A compromise solution involving putting deadbolts on the bathroom doors eventually emerged, although she is not

entirely satisfied with it. "Whenever I come across that door that's locked, it means that somebody is not comfortable with me," she says.

Jennifer also has co-workers occasionally "screw up" by using male pronouns and her previous name. Some do it on purpose, but in most cases they say it is inadvertent and apologize.

"Now, after a year and a half, most people have adapted," she notes. "Most people treat me the way I present myself."

Jennifer's experiences have spurred her participation in the Trans Advisory Group. "I decided that I had to be active," she says. "I had to find a way to fight for this issue, because I spent 30 years of my life running away from it and being completely ignorant. I don't want other people to have to do that."

Speaking of the symposium, Jennifer says: "I hope this will pique the interest of some of the legislators and some of the legislators will come to us and ask us more questions later, interact with us more out of their own interest in the subject.... I'm hoping that there are legislators who will find this important enough that they'll not just raise their hand when the time comes to do that, but they will talk to their own colleagues, that they'll make sure these bills progress and that they won't drop it in future years."

Shepherd adds: "If this legislation doesn't pass, we're going to do it again. This is an ongoing process for us.... Educating the people who are the decision makers for the state is a long-term goal."

BRO welcomes further involvement and testimony from people who are trans. "Every single person has a compelling story," Shepherd says. "We are looking for testimony from folks about...why it's important for these bills to get passed for them." ■

To offer testimony or to get involved with the TRANS ADVISORY GROUP call Melissa Shepherd at 503-222-6151.

JOHN R. OSHIN is a Portland free-lance writer.



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