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NORTHWESTnews

TRANS MISSION

National conference taps into community consciousness
by Eric Plemons



Lori Buckwalter (back row, center) was one of 20 leaders who attended the Transgender Collaborative Conference last month in Washington, D.C.

A group of leaders from across the country gathered in Washington, D.C., in early January for the first-ever Transgender Collaborative Conference. Though conversations around trans and genderqueer political identity and activism have taken place in many venues, this was the first leadership gathering of its kind organized by the Transgender Fund.

The purpose of the conference was to encourage collaborative dialogue among leaders working in the legal, legislative and direct action fields to advance the status of trans and genderqueer people in the United States. Participants did not set out to find solutions to the many challenges facing the trans community but sought rather to open a dialogue about the nature of those challenges on interpersonal, local and national levels.

Lori Buckwalter was one of 20 participants invited to join the conference. The Portlander, who works on diversity education through Multnomah County and serves as the head of It's Time, Oregon!, was one of the few grassroots activists among a conference of litigators and civil rights attorneys.

"This conference was the perfect size to allow interplay of ideas," Buckwalter says. "We were able to talk from legal and technical perspectives as well as in emotional and pragmatic terms."

According to Buckwalter, roundtable conversation focused on two overarching themes. First, assessing the challenges to the development of a

genderqueer cultural consciousness and the consequent roadblocks to political solidarity. Second, discussing legal and legislative strategies that may be used to resist the current conservative political climate, ensure safety for trans people and contribute to the complicated process of community building.

Discussing the formation of a genderqueer consciousness is a politically and emotionally multilayered issue. "This is the dialogue that has to start, even when it is difficult," Buckwalter says. "There is such a diversity of approaches to identity that keep people at different perspectives to the problem. Different trans people experience their identity differently."

Disparate theories about the origin, formation and expression of gender, debated ownership over trans legitimacy and divisiveness among trans identities all contribute to a lack of community consciousness. Until a trans community is formed, there can be no trans agenda.

Buckwalter believes fundamental questions need to be discussed in order to work toward community building. "How do we weigh the balance of identity vs. expression? How do we address the vacuum of genderqueer cultural reference and belonging? How do we deal with essentialist definitions of sex and gender? All of these conversations relate to public action. Developing consciousness is about modifying the public conscience through exposure and education. There is a lot of healing to do within our own community."

While a great deal of work remains to be done

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