

Transitional

Terms

What the T has to do with GLB

by Eric Plemons

“I am the androgyne,” wrote lesbian poet Adrienne Rich in 1973.

More than 30 years later, the androgyne who doesn't fit neatly into the boxes of male or female has a different name. It's the T on the end of GLB. That T has often been a topic of discussion, confusion and debate.

What does the T stand for? Some say transgender, but some say transsexual. More commonly, we just say “trans,” which is a nonspecific prefix signifying movement across, though or beyond something. However, according to Webster, “trans” the prefix is not an independent word and has no singular definition.

But as people grow and change, they create words to acknowledge their new identities. New language and definitions reflect the constant evolution of personal representations. So whether the T in GLBT stands for transgender or transsexual, “trans” signifies movement and change in bodies and identities. As queer communities expand to include and recognize individuals, identities and experiences that are described as trans, many of us are finding it vital that some basis of knowledge and education surround that expansion.

Educating from the ground up

Two years ago, Basic Rights Oregon recognized that it called itself a “GLBT” organization but did not have adequate skills and resources for the trans community it intended to serve. With a sincere desire to help the organization know more, BRO program director Melissa Shepherd brought together 10 trans-identified community members to form the Trans Advisory Group. Initially, TAG's mission was to present an educational workshop for staff members at BRO. The workshop was so effective and so well-received, BRO decided the program could be useful in other venues as well.

Now called the Trans Advocacy Group, TAG's strength is in the diversity of its members and their unique contribution to its central mission: to create strong allies in the community for trans people.

“We want to leave people more knowledgeable, but with more questions,” says Shepherd. “We want people to come away more comfortable with the subject, with more information and more resources.”

TAG is composed of six or seven regular presenters ranging in ages from 18 to 67. The group members have worked to develop the core workshop curriculum, but the style and focus of each presentation change to best serve each particular audience. Pre-workshop questionnaires

help presenters plan to effectively address issues of concern relevant to their audiences.

Some presentations focus on the particular legal issues that trans folks deal with on a daily basis. Other presentations utilize a more personal approach, highlighting panel members' own stories. Panel members often lead a “gender canvas” activity, inviting audience members to chart the components of their own gender identity.

“Gender identity can incorporate more than just trans issues,” says Christa-Margaret Nelson, a 31-year-old trans woman and member of TAG.

In May 2003, TAG presented a Gender Identity Symposium for 17 Oregon state legislators. Using the same central curriculum, presenters focused on basic education around gender identity and the urgency that it be included in hate crimes legislation.

Panelists felt it particularly important to inform legislators of the specific challenges that gender variance presents in everyday life. The urgency of protections against gender discrimination in housing, employment, health care and access to public restrooms were of primary focus.

“The presentation was so well-received. We were amazed,” says Shepherd.

TAG's effort toward education on trans identities is centered around the panel presentation but also utilizes a tremendously informative packet of written information. Pages of terminology definitions, descriptions of legal issues facing trans people, advice on how to be an