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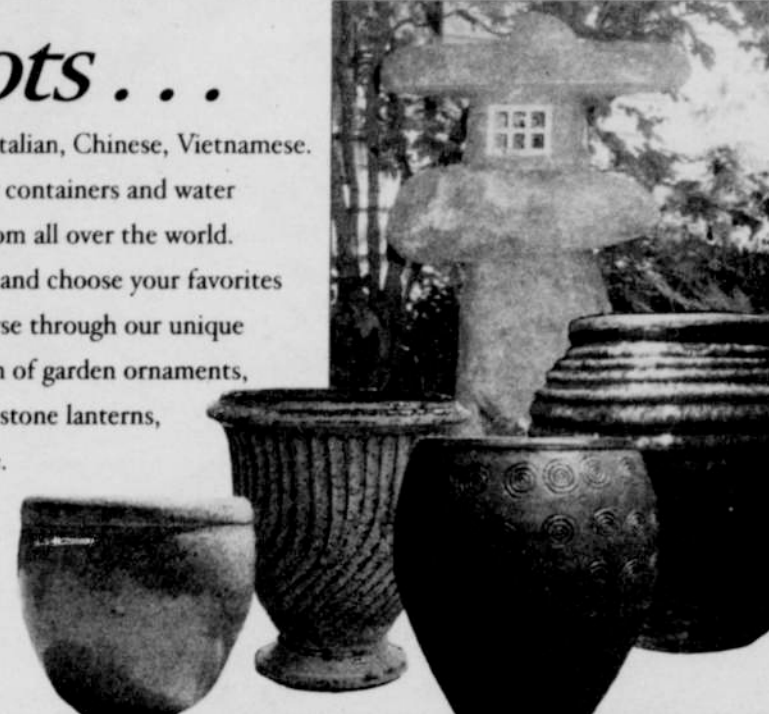
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NORTHWESTnews

A MATTER OF MONEY

Portland groups help remove barriers to physical transitions

by Jaymee R. Cuti

Two Portland nonprofit organizations are helping break down obstacles faced by transgender people by picking up the tab.

Besides costly sex reassignment surgery, other expenses associated with transitioning include electrolysis, hormone therapy, gender identity therapy—none of which are covered by insurance—and extras such as facial feminization or masculinization surgery, breast augmentation, voice lessons and a new wardrobe.

Tara Taylor moved to Portland from Hawaii to escape her lifelong gender identity issues. She soon realized those issues followed her to the Northwest.

"Within three weeks, I was calling my doctor to send me hormones and having my clothes shipped here," said Taylor.

After exhaustive research to find funds to cover her male-to-female reassignment surgery, Taylor found a benefactor who paid for everything. She says that prompted her to found the Tara Foundation, a nonprofit organization dedicated to paying for the sex reassignment surgeries of transgender people.

"My surgery is paid for, so I thought this would be the perfect way to pay back what was given to me," she said.

Another local nonprofit organization, Transforming Us, was started in 2004 by Octavian and Aidan Starr, who are members of the physically transitioning community.

"They could see the need for something like Transforming Us because of the absolute lack of resources for physically transitioning people," said Emily Walsh, a spokeswoman for the organization.

Similar to the Tara Foundation, Transforming Us raises funds for surgery but also helps raise awareness about issues affecting transgender people through educational outreach events, zines and other literature. The program also includes financial counseling to help transgender people save for the expenses surrounding transitioning.

"Transforming Us will be providing financial counseling to its beneficiaries in order to empower people to do as much as they can personally, as well providing some or all of the funds necessary for the surgeries," Walsh said.

She explains her group's holistic approach to transitioning.

"There are myriad challenges related to physically transitioning which can include such simple things as visibility, awareness and respect within the community," Walsh said. "Transforming Us hopes to address these challenges by increasing public awareness."

Both groups cite an acute financial need among the trans community because of employment discrimination and the high cost of transitioning.

"When a lot of [trans] people come out at work, they get fired and poof, you're jobless even though you've been an exemplary employee," said Taylor.

She estimated the cost of male-to-female sex reassignment surgery at between \$4,000 and \$20,000, depending on where in the world the



Emily Walsh is the public relations coordinator for Transforming Us, a fund-raising organization for transgender people.

surgery is performed. Female-to-male surgery can be twice that. The cost to remove a beard by electrolysis takes an estimated 200 to 400 hours at a cost of between \$40 and \$100 an hour.

Medical insurance companies do not cover any transitioning expenses, though some transgender people describe the surgery as "life-saving." Taylor herself battled with depression for much of her life.

"One big problem is there is not a good body of evidence that supports that sex reassignment surgery is helpful," said Taylor. "It's sort of the community's fault because with so many trans people, once they get their surgery, they want to blend in and go on with their lives. You get treated better if you blend in."

According to Walsh, raising awareness will help insurance companies understand the need for transgender people to physically transition.

"Health insurance companies need to know that there are physically transitioning people all over the world, and also allies, who vehemently disagree with the notion that these surgeries are simply cosmetic enhancements," she said.

Both groups are still in fund-raising stages, and neither has yet to fund a surgery. The Tara Foundation plans to fund one surgery by the end of 2005. It is planning a benefit concert with Michael Allen Harrison and special guests Matthew J. Clark, Jackie Burnett and the Laurie Cassell Band at 9 p.m. July 19 at Dante's, 1 S.W. Third Ave.

Transforming Us is also planning a benefit July 16 at the Sexual Minority Youth Resource Center, 2100 S.E. Belmont St. Performers include Emily Herring, Marisa Anderson and Sneakin' Out, plus hoedown activities such as sack racing, pie eating and mud wrestling. The cover is \$5-\$10 sliding scale. **J**

For more information about the TARA FOUNDATION visit www.tarafoundation.org. To learn more about TRANSFORMING US e-mail transforming_us@yahoo.com or tuvolunteers@yahoo.com.