

northwest

Building a History

Transgender conference takes on the work force

by West Duncan

Transitioning to a new job is difficult enough without any other complications involved. With the pressure of a new livelihood on the line, this gets even harder when also making another life transition—that of gender identity.

To help with this compounded problem, the Portland Human Rights Campaign's Emerging Communities committee is holding the first-ever Trans Employment Conference on March 10 at Q Center. With panel discussions and workshops, the forum will create dialogue about issues facing the transgender community—and what to tell employers when they say, "Huh?"

One of transgender people's biggest enemies in their present lives and new jobs can be their past. Coming back to haunt them in the form of different pronouns on a résumé or some confusion when talking to a reference, history can sometimes be best left alone.

"If you want to keep your transition quiet, it's really hard to do [in the workplace]," said Brenda Smith, co-chairwoman for HRC's Emerging Communities committee. "We sat down last July and decided that we needed to address a trans town hall. Instead, it steered in this direction because this just seemed more pressing."

Linda Brown, 55, knows all about moving through jobs while keeping her transition quiet.

Identifying as a heterosexual cross-dresser, she remained in the closet for 45 years. She now has the support it takes to walk among the work force with confidence.

Not only is Brown the owner of a business and happily married, she also acts as the public relations director for Northwest Gender Alliance and a personal advocate for making the workplace a comfortable environment for gender-variant people. A social support network for transsexual and transgender people, the alliance provides many resources for an underrepresented community.

"I'm kind of a success story," she said. "When I was coming out, I met people who transitioned and lost everything. You basically become reborn and therefore have no history."

Building group discussions around common fears and concerns, Brown and the HRC committee are helping make it easier to face a new challenge head on. Covering tips for résumé writing, dress codes and helpful people to know, the group will frankly address what is typically a closed-door topic.

"I think that there needs to be more communication between the trans community and businesses. We really need to create more understanding through education," said Smith.

As with many alternative lifestyles, the experience of the trans community still has yet to become something all business owners and leaders can

accommodate. It is through conferences like the Trans Employment Conference that the discussions of how to manage even the simple question of bathroom etiquette can occur.

The group also hopes to dispel myths that identifying as transgender or transsexual equates to "gender dysphoria." With this being a commonly held belief among many in positions of power, the glass ceiling gets a little thicker for those trying to break through it.

"Sometimes people say you're crazy if you want to transition. You're not crazy—you're a totally viable, skilled human being," said Brown.

This conference is hopefully one of many to come for Portland communities that embraces the struggle of progress. One discussion at a time, Brown knows that a shift of consciousness among employers will come with a shift in legislation.

"Sometimes it's hard to get people to advocate for their own self-interests," she said. "What people don't realize is that Oregon legislation is so important because it directly includes transgender equality."



Linda Brown (right) and Sheryl Weiller helped organize a conference to make the work force more comfortable for transgender people.

Through the efforts of people like Smith and Brown, Portland continues to earn its reputation for being a friendly place for those exploring the city and themselves. **10**

Q Center hosts the TRANS EMPLOYMENT CONFERENCE from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. March 10 at 69 S.E. Taylor St. The event includes panel discussions and lunch. Call 503-381-9478 to register or for more information.

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