

Trans 101

Because some of us still need it

BY AARON SPENCER

FULL DISCLOSURE: I'm not what most in the transgender community would consider qualified to teach trans sensitivity. I'm not trans, for one, and I only recently emerged from a place of ignorance to a place of nascent understanding of trans issues. But in light of recent events, I felt it was important to educate myself and use my perspective to explain trans issues to others who might be as clueless as I was.

After the Portland City Council in June unanimously approved trans-inclusive health care for city employees, it was cause for celebration in the trans community.

But the victory wasn't without its dark spots. Comments to the office of Mayor Sam Adams, who with Basic Rights Oregon championed the efforts, as well as comments in the city's media, reflected attitudes toward the trans community that were uneducated at best and offensive at worst.

Even among my LGB peers—and in the comments on *Just Out's* website—some voiced their dissatisfaction with the move. Some argued whether gender identity issues should be lumped in with sexual orientation issues. Some debated whether gender reassignment surgery is “elective” or “cosmetic.” Some balked at the very idea of gender identities.

Was I guilty of some of this? Yes. I knew very little about trans issues, save for what I gleaned from watching *Transamerica* and *Boys Don't Cry*. I'd never taken the initiative to educate myself on the matter, and I'd never personally known a trans individual.

But I hadn't been isolated from the issue, either. I'm active in Portland's LGBT community. I freelance for this newsmagazine. I've volunteered for BRO several times, where volunteers are always asked to introduce themselves with their names, sexual orientations and what gender pronouns they prefer.

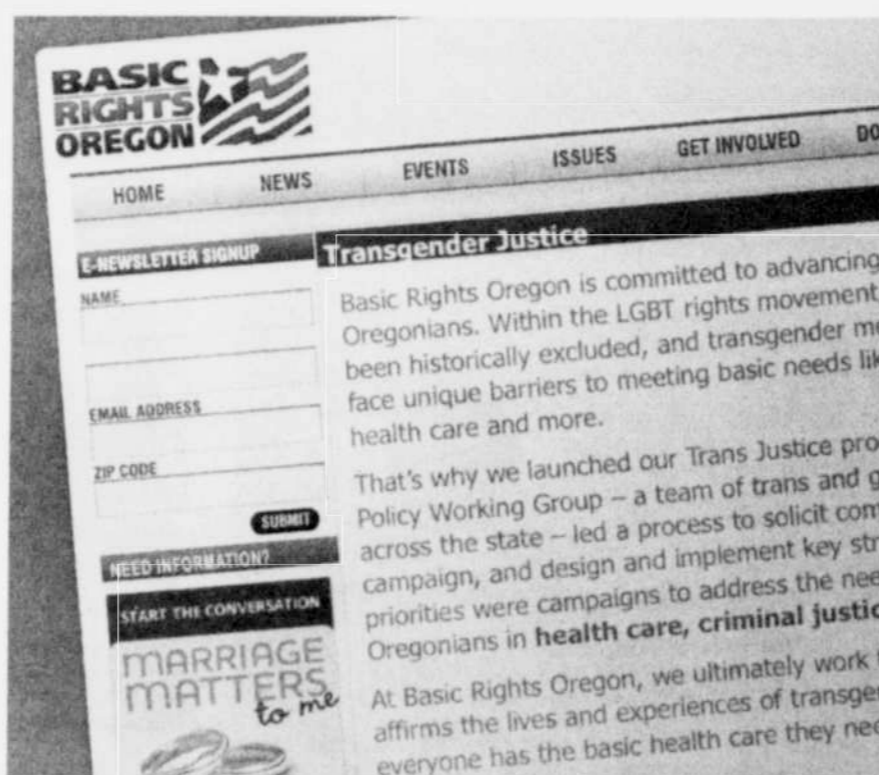
The push for trans allies is especially important as BRO begins working to bring trans-inclusive health care to more people in the state.

(It is not uncommon to hear, “I am trans and queer, and I prefer gender-neutral pronouns or my name.”)

So while I may be exceptionally thickheaded, I have to imagine that others may have a harder time coming to understand trans issues than I did. For direction, I spoke with Sasha Buchert and Tash Shatz, both part of the trans justice effort at BRO, as well as Jenn Burleton, executive director at TransActive, a nonprofit for transgender children.

First of all, gender identity disorder is a legitimate, formal diagnosis recognized by the American Medical Association, American Psychiatric Association and the World Health Organization, among other groups. You may think that goes without saying, but it is a critical starting point in a person's education about trans people. Also note that many in the trans community take issue with the word “disorder,” as they don't think being trans is any more of a disorder than being gay or lesbian.

Second, trans people do not necessarily want to talk about being trans, and they likely do not want to talk about their genitals. This means you shouldn't ask about surgery or hormones or about a person's prior name. Likewise, you shouldn't use the terms “pre-op” or “post-op.”



gender nonconforming people face disproportionate levels of discrimination and hardship. They are unemployed at twice the rate of the general population and are four times more likely to live in poverty. Also, 41 percent of them reported attempting suicide, compared to 1.6 percent of the general population. These statistics are from a poll by the National Center for Transgender Equality and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.

These struggles, like discrimination and harassment, are shared to some extent by those in the lesbian, gay and bisexual communities. The harassment is on the basis of gender expression—on people being too masculine, being too feminine or not fitting into gender norms.

But as seen in the recent debate following Portland's approval of trans-inclusive health care, not all in the LGBT community think the Ts should be included with the LGBs. Transgender advocates are trying to bridge whatever rifts may exist.

The push for trans allies is especially important as BRO begins working to bring trans-inclusive health care to more people in Oregon. The organization is looking at other cities, counties and businesses, and has an ultimate goal of being the first state to ban health insurance discrimination based on gender identity.

If and when they hit that goal, I know my reaction will be different than it was in June. ☪

You should refer to a trans person by the pronouns of the gender with which the person identifies. So if a person identifies as female, use “she” and “her,” even if the person has a male body. If you can't tell the person's gender, use the person's name instead of pronouns.

The proper term is “transgender person” or “trans person.” “Transsexual” is an older term and not as commonly used (though some prefer it). You should also avoid saying “a transgender,” “a trans,” “sex change,” “hermaphrodite” and “transvestite.” And no, you shouldn't use the word “tranny.”

Trans children identify as such early on in childhood. A transgender child will do more than behave like the opposite sex; the child will say that he or she is the opposite sex.

Keep in mind that some people may not identify with a single gender. These people are genderqueer or gender nonconforming. They may feel genderless or partially male and partially female.

The trans justice team at BRO says it's also important to realize that transgender and

For more information on trans issues and actual Trans 101 training, visit the National Center for Transgender Equality at transequality.org. You can also get involved with TransActive (transactiveonline.org) and the transgender justice team at Basic Rights Oregon (basicrights.org).

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