

Momentum: A Photo Essay of the Transgender Community in the United States Over 30 Years, 1978–2007

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As a photographer, writer, advocate, and ally of the transgender community, I have presented slide shows at a variety of conferences during the past 30 years. I have varied the slide shows according to the audience and, to challenge myself, asked various questions about my art. What fresh visual connections can I make? How do my newest images relate to earlier series? Shall I focus on individual heroes and heroines—community leaders—or on dramatic historical events that galvanized people to rethink their lives and demand policy changes? Is it appropriate to show body images and surgery? Should I focus on youth and relationships? What about speaking of my life as an artist and how it connects to the transgender community?

Long before I knowingly met a transgender person, I pondered such questions as, Why are certain character traits assigned to men or to women? and Are these traits immutable or culturally defined? My cultural anthropology studies offered some theories, but it was not until 1978, when I visited New Orleans for Mardi Gras, that I came face to face with the opportunity to explore gender identity issues through personal experience.

On the last morning of Mardi Gras, I came down to breakfast at the hotel where I was staying in the French Quarter to discover a room full of people in ball gowns, cascading wigs, butterfly eyelashes, and other regalia. Lee Brewster, founder of Lee's Mardi Gras Boutique and of *Drag Magazine*, and also known for making drag bars legal in New York City, had organized this annual trip. The group invited me to join them for breakfast, after which they paraded out of the dining room and lined up on one side of the swimming pool, striking poses. When I lifted my camera to take the picture in Figure 1, I noticed that everyone in the group was gazing

Figure 1. Vicky West (in center of photograph) at the hotel swimming pool, New Orleans, Louisiana, 1978.



in different directions except for one person, Vicky West, who focused straight back at me. As I peered through the camera lens, I had the feeling that I was looking at neither a man nor a woman but at the essence of a human being; right then, I decided that I must have this person in my life.

As it turned out, Vicky West lived about 20 blocks from me in New York City. I accompanied her to parties at Lee Brewster's Mardi Gras Boutique, to clubs around town for drag shows, and, finally, to Fantasia Fair in Provincetown, Massachusetts, the longest-running transgender conference in the United States. At Fantasia Fair, I met Ariadne Kane (see Figure 2), who founded the fair, identified as an androgyne, and referred to the transgender community as the *paraculture*.

Through Virginia Prince (see Figures 2 and 3), who identified as a transgenderist, I came to see that anatomy need not dictate sexual orientation or gender identity and

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Figure 2. Maxine, Ariadne Kane, and Virginia Prince at the Unitarian Church during Fantasia Fair, 1981.



expression. She began publishing *Transvestia* magazine in 1960 and started the Hose and Heels Club in 1962, which she first renamed the Foundation for Full Personality Expression and then, in 1976, merged with Carol Beecroft's group Mamselle to form the Society for the Second Self (Tri-Ess), a worldwide organization for heterosexual cross-dressers and their wives. Virginia Prince wrote many books and articles and is credited for inventing the term *transgender*, although its usage has since changed.

The primarily male-to-female cross-dressers I met bore little resemblance to photographs I had seen of transgender people: In those pictures, they had been presented as isolated misfits, freaks, perverts, or exhibitionists. I felt that the media had maligned the people I knew and others like them; with my experience as a photographer, I realized, I had the opportunity to change this vision. I started to make portraits of individuals. For most of the people I photographed, our photo sessions were their first experience with an

Figure 3. Virginia Prince at a Fantasia Fair seminar, 1992.



outsider who encouraged them to express their feminine side and to use the shooting area, whether it was inside or outdoors, as the place to express themselves as full human beings. We experimented with feelings, movement, clothes, and makeup. For some, the experience of seeing themselves in a positive light allowed them to let go of years of shame and guilt, to move from self-hate to self-acceptance. Along with offering my subjects intimate, natural images of themselves, I started to present these photographs to the outside world, to counteract the negative images that most nontransgender people were familiar with. It was an opportunity to right a wrong while making art.

As I came to know more people, I started making visual explorations such as photographing the same person as a man and as a woman (see Figure 4). I wanted to see how facial expression and body language changed when gender identity changed. Then I started photographing individuals in relationships, first with transgender friends, then with spouses and other relatives, and, finally, with their children (see Figures 5 and 6).

I photographed with 35 mm Nikon cameras, using both color slide film and black-and-white negative film. Sometimes I decided beforehand whether a situation would be better portrayed in color or in black and white, but I usually photographed with both and then edited carefully to decide which images worked best. All of the images in this essay are mine.

During the 1980s, along with my work with cross-dressers, (almost all were male-to-female), I also had the opportunity to photograph various community leaders and icons. One of these leaders, Merissa Sherrill Lynn (see Figure 7), founded the Tiffany Club of New England, the International Foundation for Gender Education

Figure 4. Joe, and Joe as Diahanna, Bay Area, California, 1985.



Figure 5. Amy and her husband, Rita, near Boston, Massachusetts, 1983.



(IFGE), *Transgender Tapestry* magazine, and the IFGE annual conference.

In 1984, I joined actress and director Lee Grant's crew as the still photographer for the documentary film on transgenderism she was making for Home Box Office. *What Sex Am I?* (1985) included Christine Jorgensen (see Figure 8), a fellow actress whom Lee

Figure 7. Merissa Sherrill Lynn at Walden Pond, near Boston, Massachusetts, 1987.



Figure 6. Elayne with son Ryan, Iowa, 1985.



Figure 8. Christine Jorgensen in her living room, 1984.**Figure 9.** Steve Dain, Union City, California, 1984.

knew. As they sat in Christine's living room gossiping about Hollywood, I had to remind myself that Christine was the person known around the world for the media storm that erupted in 1952 upon her return to the United States from Denmark after sexual reassignment surgery: "Ex-GI Becomes Blonde Beauty" quipped the headline on the front page of the *New York Daily News*. Although she was not the first person to have such surgery, she was the first to be given female hormones to enhance her femininity. Besides performing as an actress and a singer, she was generous in sharing her experience through lectures and interviews, giving hope to transsexuals worldwide. I photographed her again at the very emotional 1988 IFGE convention, one year before she died of cancer.

Steve Dain (see Figure 9), who also appeared in *What Sex Am I?* (1985), had been fired from his award-winning teaching job in California after his transition from Doris to Steve in the mid-1970s. When we met him, he had become a chiropractor. Like Christine, he made public appearances and was available to other transsexuals who sought information and advice.

Through Ariadne Kane I met Lou Sullivan (see Figure 10), another icon of the transgender community. A prolific writer who authored a book on the life and times of Babe Beame (Sullivan, 1990), as well as an activist on behalf of female-to-males, he was responsible for starting *FTM Newsletter* and the support group FTM International.

Lou lived in San Francisco and identified as a gay man. He died of AIDS in 1991.

In 1988, I was awarded a grant from the New York State Council on the Arts for my work with cross-dressers. To my shock, the *New York Post* went on the attack regarding the validity of my award and three others: "Tax \$\$ Paying for Men in Drag!" (1988) screamed the front-page headline. I discovered that the only way I could sue the *Post* was through a new law against the defamation of art. Because newspaper staff had cropped my images to suit their purposes, such a lawsuit could have become a test case; however, the last thing I wanted to do was expose transgender people to the *Post's* negative scrutiny. I hired a lawyer and we settled out of court.

One year later, in 1989, my first book, *Transformations: Crossdressers and Those Who Love Them*, was published. I limited the book to photographs of cross-dressers and focused on presenting them in the daylight of everyday life, in relationships. The text came from taped interviews and letters. In editing this material, I worked to retain the voice of the individuals presented in the book.

I see the 1980s as a period when the transgender community was in the process of defining itself and coming together. Much of the outreach during that decade came from members of cross-dresser organizations contacting the media in order to reach other people like themselves. These individuals appeared on talk shows to

Figure 10. Lou Sullivan in his bedroom, San Francisco, California, 1988.



distribute more widely information about such groups as the IFGE and Tri-Ess so that transgender people would have a number to call and a place to go, as well as know that they were not alone. I helped coordinate a number of these shows and also appeared on them to speak as an outside expert. Many in the trans community felt that using a therapist as the expert would have reinforced the assumption that cross-dressing was a mental illness.

Conferences during the 1980s were emotional and experiential; these meetings emphasized building self-confidence by learning skills to look and act real, to pass. As a feminist, I experienced some surreal moments listening to transgender presenters offer their idealized, 1950s-like visions of how women thought and behaved, ideas based on childhood memories of their mothers and sisters and aunts.

In the 1990s, the Internet began to replace the telephone tree, and conferences and other transgender gatherings became less emotional and more focused on political organizing. Instead of accommodating themselves to existing in a hostile society, transgender people turned to changing the world in which we live. Concurrently, the female-to-male transgender community started to take on more visibility. Members of this community tended to be younger adults with less disposable income and more experience with consensus building. Less fearful of losing their jobs or partners, they joined with male-to-female transsexuals at transgender political

Figure 11. Leslie Feinberg faces the guard at Camp Trans, 1994.



events and participated in Southern Comfort, an annual conference in Atlanta, Georgia.

In 1994, 3 years after a transgender woman, Nancy Jean Burkholder, was ejected from the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival because she was a woman not born as a woman, Riki Anne Wilchins created Camp Trans on land outside the festival grounds. Transgender people and allies bonded over wet tents and discussions about what makes a man or a woman. Leslie Feinberg, who is androgynous; Jamison Green, a very masculine female-to-male transsexual; Riki, a male-to-female transsexual; and Cody, who is intersex, presented themselves as living gender identity questions to one of the festival guards (see Figure 11). Later that day, guarded by the Lesbian Avengers, I spent a few hours at the Womyn's Music Festival with Leslie Feinberg, who was an invited speaker, and a few other people from Camp Trans who were willing to pay to attend.

In 1995, more than 100 transgender people and allies from all over the United States converged in Washington,

Figure 12. The transgender-organized press conference in Washington, DC, 1995. Dawn Wilson is speaking.



Figure 13. Vigil at the Brandon Teena murder trial, Falls City, Nebraska, 1995.



DC, for a press conference to get media attention before starting congressional lobbying the next day. It was time to let politicians know that they had transgender constituents, that these constituents were not covered by antidiscrimination laws, and that they experienced violent hate crimes at a higher rate than other minorities. This event was the largest public transgender gathering I had experienced, and it felt to me like a turning point for transgender activism. Many community leaders participated, including Phyllis Randolph Frye, Riki Wilchins, Nancy Nangeroni, Tony Barreto-Neto, Joanne Roberts, Alison Laing, Jamison Green, Yvonne Cook-Riley, Dawn Wilson, and others (see Figure 12). Also participating were spouses, partners, and other family members; a transgender teenager; and German filmmaker Rosa von Praunheim, with his crew. Unfortunately, the O. J. Simpson trial verdict was announced the next day, superseding any attention the media might have paid to the press conference and transgender issues.

In 1993, Brandon Teena, a female-to-male cross-dresser, was brutally murdered by three young men, one of whom was his girlfriend's ex-boyfriend. The case went on trial in 1995 in Falls City, Nebraska, and a group of transgender people and allies gathered for a vigil outside the courthouse (see Figure 13). Among those present were local activists and community leaders Nancy Nangeroni, Tony Barreto-Neto, Riki Wilchins, Leslie Feinberg, Minnie Bruce Pratt, and Kate Bornstein. Also attending was Kim Peirce, who wrote and directed the film *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), which was based on the 1993 Brandon Teena case. Many activists wore the iconic Transsexual Menace black T-shirt and jacket, which gave a sense of solidarity at vigils and poked fun at transphobia. The Brandon Teena case made public what had been happening to transgender people all along—shockingly violent murders of transgender individuals had (and have)

Figure 14. Gay Pride Parade, New York City, 1995. The sign reads, "No more transgender murders! Brandon Teena should have been here."



been documented as occurring at least once a month—and served as a focal point for the visibility of trans issues (see Figure 14).

From the early 1990s on, the transgender community has been extraordinarily active politically. Most of the participants at vigils in the 1990s were activists who lived full time in the gender in which they identified—but in 1995, Miranda Stevens-Miller did something new in response to the murder of Christian Paige, a 22-year-old transgender woman, in Chicago. Miranda was the president of the Chicago chapter of Tri-Ess, an organization limited to heterosexual cross-dressers and their spouses. Because most cross-dressers are closeted, it was a remarkable feat for Miranda to convince members of the organization to come out into the early-morning light to protest Christian Paige's brutal murder, hand out flyers, and speak to the media (see Figures 15 and 16). Miranda, a

Figure 15. Miranda Stevens-Miller (in light jacket) talks to the press at the Christian Paige murder vigil in Chicago, 1995.



Figure 16. Jay Sennett at the Christian Paige murder vigil, Chicago, 1995.



scientist with Kraft Foods, went on to become a leading activist in the Midwest.

Occurring at the same time as the memorials for murdered transgender people, exhilarating triumphs of justice, such as the Sean O'Neill trial, also took place. Sean O'Neill, like Brandon Teena before him, may not have known the term *transgender* or that there were others like him. By the time he was 19, he looked and acted like a young man and had consensual sex with several teenage girlfriends, two of whom were underage. Charged by the girls' parents, he faced the possibility of 40 years in prison for sexual assault and statutory rape. A powerful group of trans advocates convened at the courthouse in Colorado Springs, Colorado, in the heart of Christian Right territory. Outside the courthouse, transgender activist Aaron Davis carried my all-time favorite political sign, which read, "God does **not** make mistakes" (see Figure 17). As nature is varied, so are human beings.

Figure 17. Aaron Davis outside the courthouse where Sean O'Neill was being tried, Colorado Springs, Colorado, 1996.



Inside the courthouse, well-known transgender men Jamison Green and Sheriff Tony Barreto-Neto described their individual lives as respectable family men who were fortunate enough to have had the support of the transgender community. To our jubilation, instead of 40 years, the judge sentenced Sean to 90 days in the court jailhouse, going so far as to request that Sean be housed separately to keep him safe from potential attacks by male or female inmates. In just 1 day, we witnessed a monumental triumph of justice reinforced by teenage lust as Sean's pager rang off the hook with calls from girlfriends wanting to see him before he went to jail (see Figure 18).

A shy woman propelled into activism by discovering in her 30s that she was intersex (she started life as Charlie), Cheryl Chase became an extraordinary activist on behalf of the estimated one in 2,000 babies born with ambiguous genitalia (see Figure 19). Distressed over a lack of sensation in her genital area, Cheryl researched her history and discovered that she had been born with ambiguous genitalia, which had been surgically "corrected." She

Figure 18. Sean O'Neill being interviewed after his trial, Colorado Springs, Colorado, 1996.



Figure 19. Cheryl Chase, Petaluma, California, 1997.



Figure 20. Heidi, a demonstrator at a 1997 event in New York City organized by Hermaphrodites With Attitude, breaks down as she confronts how her surgery has affected her life.



founded the Intersex Society of North America (ISNA), the purpose of which is to rid individuals of the shame affiliated with being intersex and to educate caregivers and doctors so that they operate on infants only in case of medical emergency. ISNA advocates that parents raise intersex children in one gender and wait to see how each child identifies. Hermaphrodites With Attitude, the activist arm of ISNA, began organizing demonstrations at medical conferences and facilities, such as a 1997 event at Columbia Presbyterian Babies Hospital in New York City (see Figure 20).

As I see it, masculinity and femininity are on a gender identity continuum, hetero- and homosexuality on a sexual orientation continuum, and, finally, anatomy on a male-female continuum. Seeing gender identity, sexual orientation, and anatomy as separate continuums sounds simple enough, but there has been tremendous disagreement about who may claim intersexuality. If a transgender person can claim a physical cause for being transgender, the issue stops being considered a personal choice by those who would place blame and, with that, the burden of guilt and shame disappears. When tests have shown no chromosomal or anatomical variance, I have heard transgender people claim to be mentally intersex. That brings me right back to the issues I find most

fascinating: How do we see ourselves? How do we know who we are? From where does this knowledge come?

In 1995, I had the good fortune to meet Rosa von Praunheim, the prodigiously productive German cinematographer, writer, and political activist. I became his consultant and still photographer for the film *The Transsexual Menace* (1996), which he was making for German and French television. One day, we went in search of Sylvia Rae Rivera, who lived with other homeless people in the West Village of New York, somewhere on the piers facing the Hudson River (see Figure 21). She was known for having thrown the second Molotov cocktail at the Stonewall uprising in 1969 and for being a founding member of the Gay Liberation Front and the Gay Activists Alliance in the early 1970s. Sylvia and her friend Marsha P. Johnson were active members of Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries, an organization that helped homeless youth who, like Sylvia, had been thrown out of their homes for being too effeminate. Sylvia was 11 when she started wearing lipstick to school and became unacceptable to her grandmother.

Shortly after *The Transsexual Menace* (1996) was made, Sylvia was invited to live at what was known as Transy House, where she was rehabilitated from drug and alcohol addiction. Rusty Mae Moore, the owner of the house, and her partner, Chelsea Goodwin, along with Julia Murray, who became Sylvia's partner, provided space in a Brooklyn brownstone where other transgender people

Figure 21. Silvia Rivera, 1996.



Figure 22. Leslie Feinberg speaks at Silvia Rivera's memorial service, New York City, 2002.



could stay, especially during a crisis. Sylvia worked as a cook at Transy House, as well as at the Metropolitan Community Church's homeless shelter. She became an inspirational leader and a mother figure to many transgender youth. In her last years, Sylvia directed her energy toward getting the Sexual Orientation Non-Discrimination Act (SONDA) to include gender identity and then get it passed in New York City. She died of liver cancer 2 months before the passage of the bill in late 2002. Sylvia Rivera's evening memorial service, featuring speakers from all parts of the transgender community (see Figure 22), was a powerful event; a tribute in front of the Stonewall Inn followed, and then the placing of her ashes in the Hudson River by those she called her children.

In 1998, I worked with Kate Davis and David Heilbroner on a film for A&E Television, *Transgender Revolution*. The first documentary to emphasize political issues as much as personal stories, the film was nominated for a Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) media award. We filmed at True Spirit, a conference focused on female-to-male and genderqueer youth. Maxwell Anderson brought his best friend, Robert Eads, to this event because he knew Robert was very sick with ovarian cancer and he wanted to give Robert the trip as a gift (see Figure 23). During the filming of a discussion group, Robert quietly mentioned that he was dying. That evening, Kate Davis and I had the same thought: A film needed to be made about Robert, not just because he was a wonderful human being (I had known Max and Robert for many years by then), but also as a cautionary tale for female-to-male transsexuals who tend to avoid going to gynecologists for physical exams.

Bobbie Eads grew up in West Virginia, married twice, and gave birth to two sons. When they were teenagers, he had chest-reduction surgery and went on testosterone, but

Figure 23. Robert Eads at the True Spirit Conference, Washington, DC, 1998.



on his surgeon's advice he did not have a hysterectomy. Robert moved to Florida, where he married a woman named Maxine and met Maxwell Anderson, another female-to-male transsexual. When Robert and Maxine separated, he followed Maxwell to Atlanta, Georgia. At that point, Robert knew he had cancer. Seeing him in terrible pain, the couple he was living with contacted more than 20 doctors, as well as three hospitals, all of which refused to accept Robert as a patient. Finally, almost a month later, they found a doctor in rural Georgia.

Southern Comfort, Kate Davis's next film, for which I also worked as consultant and still photographer, won

Figure 24. Robert Eads at a Southern Comfort Conference luncheon, Atlanta, Georgia, 1999.



Figure 25. Amanda's close friend Patra speaks at the memorial for Amanda Milan, New York City, 2000.



the 2001 Sundance Festival Grand Prize in documentary film. The film chronicles the last year of Robert Eads's life, his circle of friends, his passionate relationship with Lola Cola (who is male-to-female), the medical calamities he experienced, his relationships with his natal family, and his love for Southern Comfort, the annual transgender conference in Atlanta, Georgia, that represented his chosen family (see Figure 24). Robert's legacy is the medical checkup organized for female-to-male transgender people at a number of national conferences. Working on this film was heartbreaking and anxiety producing because we did not know how long Robert would live. The six main people in the film—Robert and Lola, Max and Cori, Cas and Stephanie—moved me deeply. I see them as folk heroes—as honest in front of the camera as in their lives, wise, loving, witty, and willing to appear silly at times. In spite of their personal crises and the potential personal dangers they confronted by appearing in this film, the core group stood together out of love for Robert—and

Figure 26. Vigil at Amanda Milan murder site, Port Authority, New York City, 2000.



Figure 27. Transgender, genderqueer, and questioning youth from schools throughout the United States attend the 2002 True Spirit Conference in Washington, DC. Some of the students were transitioning in single-sex schools, such as Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts.



because they knew this film would make a difference in the understanding of the trans community and especially in the lives of female-to-male transgender people.

In 2000, the New York City transgender community experienced a terrible shock. Amanda Milan, a 25-year-old transgender woman, was walking by the Port Authority at 4:00 in the morning when she was verbally assaulted by a man who thought she was male. Another man, carrying

Figure 28. Students from Florida at GenderPAC's National Conference on Gender, Washington, DC, 2002.



Figure 29. Kiwi Grady, Drew, A.J., and Grover at True Spirit, 2002.



a knife, offered it to her assailant, who proceeded to slit her throat while a line of cab drivers and food vendors watched and cheered. She died before reaching St. Vincent's Hospital. Six weeks later, there was a huge march to the Port Authority murder site and a memorial service held at the Metropolitan Community Church (see Figures 25 and 26). The remarkably diverse gathering included Amanda's family as well as members of the House Ball scene, some of whom had been in the film *Paris Is Burning* (1991) and knew Amanda well.

I had noticed that by the late 1990s, all the demonstrations, vigils, and other transgender political events included young people of college age (see Figures 27 and 28). At first I was hesitant about photographing them (an issue left over from my being a parent), but once I started talking to a core group that included Kiwi Grady and her friends Drew, Grover, and A.J. (see Figure 29), I discovered that they welcomed being photographed and quoted. Kiwi (see Figure 30), a student at New York University, started New York City's first and only transgender college club, T-Party. She and her friends, referring to their gender identities, called themselves *the fluids*. Tommy, a political activist since his transition at age 16, was a cofounder of FIERCE! and active in the Asian and Pacific Islander Coalition on HIV/AIDS (see Figure 31). In the last few months before leaving for Germany to work with my publisher on my next book, I decided that the first part of *The Gender Frontier* (2004) would focus on transgender and genderqueer youth. Rather than imagining a coffee table book, I visualized my upcoming book as being just the right size to fit into student backpacks.

Since the 1990s, the focus on transgender youth has been growing exponentially. Students in high school are politically active, and children as young as six go through nonmedical transition with the support of

Figure 30. Kiwi Grady, New York City, 2002.



parents, schools, and clinicians. Many scientists are now convinced that people are shaped before birth and that nature is far more important than nurture in the formation of gender identity and sexual orientation. This theory contradicts the belief that nurturing is the

Figure 31. Tommy Wang, Chinatown, New York City, 2003.



Figure 32. Coco, a homeless activist, at City Hall, New York City, 2002.



dominant factor in creating the essence of a human being—a bias that most of us have grown up believing. This dramatic theoretical reversal is of major importance in the treatment of transgender youth and the reduction of parental guilt.

In transgender political activism, people of all ages and walks of life seem to be able to work together. This fact came as a surprise to me because I have not noticed such solidarity among people in everyday life. With the pressing need to reverse discrimination, every case seems to bring out new activists. I have attempted to capture some of this diversity in my photographs (see Figures 32 and 33). In spite of major opposition to equal rights for people whose gender identity and expression vary, we are gaining ground all the time. One satisfying win involved the case of Helena Stone, a 70-year-old electrician who was

Figure 33. Members of the transgender community demonstrate in front of a Toys R Us store at Times Square in New York City. Three transgender women had been taunted by clerks at a Toys R Us in the Bronx, New York, in 2003.



Figure 34. Helena Stone, New York City, 2006.



installing telephones at Grand Central Station in New York City in 2006 when, on three separate occasions, the Metropolitan Transit Authority attempted to arrest her for using the women's washroom (see Figure 34). Michael Silverman, executive director of the Transgender Legal Defense and Education Fund, won Helena's case (see Figure 35). As a result, Metropolitan Transit Authority employees were required to attend sensitivity training.

Nationally known transgender leaders such as Riki Wilchins of GenderPAC; Mara Keisling, who founded the National Center for Transgender Equality (NCTE); Phyllis Randolph Frye, a lawyer from Texas; Jamison Green,

Figure 35. Press conference organized by Michael Silverman at Grand Central Station, New York City, after he won Helena Stone's case in October 2006.



formerly with FTM International; and many others are quoted by the media on a regular basis. Furthermore, now that GLAAD includes transgender people in its monitoring of media representation, the media have found it more difficult to mock trans individuals and get away with it.

In 2004, nine transgender women, seven of whom were delegates, worked at the Democratic National Convention in Boston, Massachusetts. Monica Helms, a delegate from Georgia, discovered that Jerry Springer—a television talk show host who consistently presented the cruelest and crudest shows, many of which specialized in mocking transgender people—also would be a delegate to the convention. Monica wanted to be on the other side of the microphone asking Springer the tough questions, so she planned to interview him. Miraculously, the timing of my floor pass coincided with Monica's, and I found myself within feet of the interview (see Figure 36). Equally thrilling was spending the last night of the convention with Lisa Mottet, a lawyer for the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, and Mara Keisling of NCTE (see Figure 37). As the balloons fell, our imaginations raced; we were thinking that perhaps we had reached a turning point for the United States and for transgender rights.

Monica Helms and Angela Brightfeather founded the Transgender American Veterans Association (TAVA) in 2003. TAVA's purpose is to help gender-nonconforming veterans get fair and equal medical care at all health care facilities, as well as to educate the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs and the U.S. Department of Defense on how to treat transgender patients. When the group held its first convention in 2004 in Washington, DC, 50 veterans, many of them elderly, frail, and in poor health, came from all over the country to attend. Convention-goers took a tour of the monuments and memorials in the federal

Figure 36. Monica Helms interviews talk show host Jerry Springer, 2004.



Figure 37. Lisa Mottet and Mara Keisling celebrate at the 2004 Democratic National Convention in Boston, Massachusetts.



district (see Figure 38) and laid a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier on behalf of transgender veterans. On that crowded spring day, not a single member of the general public snickered.

Along with the intense activity geared toward changing legal, medical, and public attitudes about gender identity and expression, the 1990s brought anthropologists, historians, and other academicians into the field of gender studies. Documentary film, performance art, literature, and religion all found a home in this expansive field.

Figure 38. Transgender veterans at the Washington Memorial, Washington, DC, 2004.



Figure 39. Holly Boswell at the Southern Comfort Conference in Atlanta, Georgia, 1999.



One person who was uniquely qualified to bring theater, pageantry, and spirituality to transgender conferences is Holly Boswell (see Figure 39), the founder of Kindred Spirits. The home page of the Kindred Spirits website (<http://www.trans-spirits.org>) defines the organization as

A global network based in the Southern Appalachians near Asheville, North Carolina since 1993. In the forefront of service to the spiritual life of the transgendered community, supporting its leaders, teachers, healers, artists and seekers in non-dogmatic, creative and playful ways. (Kindred Spirits, n.d., ¶ 1–2)

Holly Boswell's training in theater led her to create the Travelling Medicine Show, a performance group connected to Kindred Spirits. Both groups study Native American practices related to gender-variant people and participate in drumming and spirit circles, vision quests, and shamanistic explorations. Holly has also enabled fledgling performers to appear onstage at transgender talent shows and has created a safe place for people to speak their minds at spirit circles at conferences. In affiliation with Kindred Spirits and other alternative religious groups, gender-variant people can take charge of their spiritual practices instead of experiencing the shame, fear, and guilt that have been such an overwhelming part of the lives of transgender people who have been rejected by traditional religions.

Over the past 30 years, thanks to such leaders and pioneers, more and more gender-variant, transgender, and non-transgender-identified people in the United States have moved from self-hate to self-acceptance, with some finding love with people like themselves. In reaching greater self-acceptance, the old shame-based humility that accepted the legal and medical authorities' edicts of how human beings may live, relate, and define themselves is no longer acceptable. In the transgender community especially, self-definition is a growing concept.

No part of society, either in the United States or in the rest of the world, has been left untouched by the emergence of transgender people and the questions that are lived through their experiences. Even nontransgender people may be inspired to escape from gender-role confinement. Without our realizing it, societal policies race to keep up with the changes waiting at our doorsteps. While science and religion undergo territorial struggles, the transgender movement, step by step, offers fresh ways of looking at what it means to be a human being.

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