

Transgender *Community* NEWS

**"Nice Box. Wonder
What's In It?"**

*— Observations on
the R.S. Institute*

NTAC

Lobbies

D.C.

**Interview: HRC
Board Member
Abby Rubinfeld**

**...and
L'abbe
de Choisy
—TG in
History**



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**Plus: Regina Antiqua,
Vis A Vis, No Limit!
Gender Reflections, and MORE!**

TRANSGENDER Community NEWS



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Editor-in-Chief:

Angela Gardner
Managing Editor:
Miranda Wright
Contributing Editors:
Dina Amberle
JoAnn Roberts
Amanda Richards
Kerry Sorrell – *Calendar*

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Mountaintop Design

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Diane Boykin

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Emily Sheldon

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On our cover: The NTAC lobbyists in Washington, DC. Photo courtesy of Pamela DeGroff.

OPINION

“Nice Box. Wonder What’s In it?”

By Lotta Hubris

On Thursday, 22 March, I and other attendees of the 15th Annual convention of the International Foundation for Gender Education were herded onto Greyhound-style land cruisers and plied with imported champagne and exotic canapes served by beautiful hostesses in formal attire. We were required to watch a videotape of Rikki Swin describing her new institute as the busses made their way through rush-hour traffic into downtown Chicago. When we disembarked, we were directed up steep flights of steps (there was no elevator) to a hot and windowless fourth floor, where, as we sweated, we were fed by caterers from trays of hors d’oeuvres made from rare meats and expensive vegetables. Drinks were free, and the dual entertainments were a harpist and Ms. Swin looking radiantly self-content as she held court.

The reception marked the grand opening of the Rikki Swin Institute—formerly Gender Education Research and Library, until wiser heads informed Ms. Swin that this was an unfortunate acronym. The mission of the R.S. Institute is “to stimulate changes in culture to improve trans person understanding and acceptance,” and towards that end, Ms. Swin has purchased a building at a cost of \$2m and thrown in an extra million or so for renovations which will include what is certainly a first in the transgender community, custom light fixtures.

I like parties. I went to this one because I knew there would be chocolate-dipped strawberries (and there were). But the Rikki Swin Institute’s debut was a display in arrogance and ostentation in a community which is conspicuously poor. The asparagus budget alone could have supported several of the transgender community’s smaller organizations for a year or more.

It was clear to most of those who attended that Ms.



Swin had spent a great deal of money to show her guests what is in essence a facade. There was no workspace and no sign of the collections of transgender historical material she managed to buy last year, or of preparations for housing it. “Nice box. Wonder what’s in it?” one wag asked.

Ms. Swin was conspicuously absent from the IFGE conference, which she co-sponsored, but periodically siphoned off some of the more presentable attendees in order to show Chicago and presumably the rest of the world that we transgenders are just like everyone else. Of course, transgenders are not like everyone else. Conference attendees included Trankita, who sported a beard and various dayglo wigs, and Christine Hochberg, who is notorious for wearing skirts an inch or two shorter than Mr. Happy. They were not selected for Ms. Swin’s dog-and-pony shows, for despite the Institute’s mission statement, her aim is not to show us as we are, but to whitewash, to deny our difference. This is a sensibility the transgender community as a whole outgrew some ten years ago, when we came to understand such behavior was a measure of our shame. One can only hope Ms. Swin will move beyond such attitudes and come to value the community for its diversity and not for its abil-

ity to be invisible.

Ms. Swin has certainly demonstrated her willingness to spend money. I believe her heart is in the right place, but I'm concerned by her performance to date. She has not consulted the transgender community about what it wants, and her ability to work with others seems to be directly related to their willingness to bow to her authority. More importantly, she is sending signals to transgenders that unless we are able to pass convincingly as nontransgendered we are not acceptable in polite society—a curious thing, considering the R.S. Institute's mission statement. I find myself wondering whether the Institute's board of directors has the ability to control Ms. Swin and prevent her from taking her millions with her when she inevitably decides to take her bat and ball and go home.

With her initial investment of five million dollars, Ms. Swin has surpassed the combined budgets of all other transgender organizations for perhaps five years. She must now decide whether she wishes to spend her money in pursuit of personal vanity or in actual fulfillment of the Institute's mission statement. Here's hoping she will have the strength of character to do the right thing.



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Regina Antiqua

on the road.

Our own Ms. Bob will be at
A Different Light Bookstore
in San Francisco to do a slide show
and lecture on all of the Regina
Antiquas that have been featured in
TCN since the beginning.
Keep reading for further details.



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