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Transsexual Womyn at the 1995 Michigan Womyn's Music Festival

Plus: **Transsexual Parenting Options ❁ Sisters in Arms?: the Compatibility of Feminism and Male-to-Female Transsexuality ❁ Transsexual vs. Transgender: Synonyms or Contradictions? ❁ Practicing What We Preach ❁ More on the Takeover of the 1995 Transgender Health Conference ❁ A Feminist Peeks at the "Me" in Men ❁ reviews of *Mirrors: Portrait of a Lesbian Transsexual* and *Deathwish* ❁ and more**

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Their Fifteen Minutes in the Sun

by Dallas Denny

On Sunday, 18 June, 1995, in Minneapolis, the Transgender Health Symposium put together by Drs. Walter Bockting for the 17th National Lesbian and Gay Health Conference was taken over by transgender protestors, who seized the microphone and overran the stage. The actual events were covered in the previous issue of *TransSisters*.

The motto of the activist group Transexual Menace is "confront with love," but there was no love in this group of protestors. Nor was there any rationality. Their claim that the panel, which consisted of myself, Martine Rothblatt, and Armand Hotimsky, were not members of "the community" was more than offensive, as all three of us live full-time in the gender not assigned to us at birth, and all have taken hormones and had surgery to modify our bodies. The claim of the protestors that the three-member panel selected by Drs. Bockting was "white, middle-class and middle-aged" was an attempt to paint us as homogenous, affluent, and unconcerned about transgender health issues, which was untrue. Well, we were all white. Martine, however, is in an interracial marriage and is raising several children from that marriage. Armand had just turned thirty, and neither Armand nor I make or have ever made enough money to be considered middle-class and would not have been there had NLGHA not been kind enough to pick up our transportation and lodging expenses and waived our registration fees. The panel was diverse in terms of its sexual orientation as well, as Armand identifies as heterosexual, I as bisexual, and Martine as lesbian. Two of us identify as women, and one as a man. All of us are long-term transgender activists. In actuality, the only oversight Walter Bockting can reasonably be said to have made was in terms of racial diversity. It would have been more than appropriate to have had a person of color on the panel. However, Dr. Bockting had brought several transgendered persons of color to Minneapolis to speak in other portions of the NLGHA conference, and to give the Program in Human Sexuality at the University of Minnesota important feedback; it was not as if he were deliberately ignoring issues of race and class.

> ***"The takeover of the Transgender Health Symposium was not born out of concern for transgender and transexual health issues. It happened because...Margaret O'Hartigan['s]...colossal ego caused her to believe that only she was capable of addressing transgender health issues."***

Nor were the speakers ignoring important health issues. Although Martine's talk (what she was allowed to give of it) focused on the importance of doing away with differentiation and discrimination of people because of their genitals, rather than directly upon health issues. Armand talked about HIV, the lack of legal rights of transexual and transgendered people in certain European countries, the rise of the fascist party in France and what that means for toleration of diversity, the murder of noted sexologist Pasteur Doucé by French secret police, and other issues. I spoke about job and housing discrimination faced by transexual and transgendered people, self-injurious behavior like alcoholism and drug addiction which we develop because of our shame and guilt, and about the very real issues which force us, especially in our youth, onto the street and into sex work. I spoke of the many dangers and discriminations those on the street face. My list included the high rate of HIV infection in transgendered sex workers, silicone injections, dangers of overuse of hormones, botched surgeries, discrimination at shelters and in treatment programs, harassment by the police, and the tragically high incidence of bashings and murders of transgendered and transexual people. In fact, the protestors did not bring up a single health issue which I had not already addressed. And I knew they would not, which was why I insisted on speaking right after Martine. I wanted to make it clear that I am passionately concerned about the issues the protestors were claiming I don't care about.

The protestors spent most of their time talking about their accomplishments and the programs they had founded and about political issues involving psychiatric gatekeeping, and got into substantive discussion of health issues only at the end of the symposium, when audience members asked specific questions about their transgendered and transexual clients: "What is the risk of breast cancer in male-to-female transsexuals?" "What about testicular cancer?" "What are the dangers of injected silicone?" To their credit, the protestors did their best to answer such questions, but it was too little, too late. Many of the audience members left feeling frustrated because their pressing questions about transgendered and transexual health needs had not been addressed to their satisfaction.

Currently, the transgender community is working together as never before to protest the Human Rights Campaign Fund's deliberate decision to fight to keep transgender-inclusive language

out of the Employment Nondiscrimination Act (ENDA). The final straw was that HRCF lobbyists actively worked to persuade the bill's sponsors to remove the language after transgender lobbyists had managed to get it included. HRCF steadfastly refuses to add language to protect us and is stonewalling us (nice term, that) at every turn. Executive Director Elizabeth Birch is willing to deflect our questions, gloss over them, tell us lies in response to them, or even ignore them, for HRCF does not want us included and will do its best to see that we are excluded. In such a situation, political action is both wanted and needed. But to disrupt a panel of long-term transgender activists who spend the major portions of their lives addressing transgender and transexual health issues is unconscionable -- and that's just what occurred.

Perhaps some of the protestors believed, as the result of what they were told by Margaret O'Hartigan, that their health issues would not be addressed by the original panel. However, the organizers of the protest, O'Hartigan and Christine Tayleur, knew darn well that I planned to talk about issues affecting those on the street and that I would condemn the recent action of the Minnesota State Legislature to abolish the public funding of transexual surgery.

There was no real concern shown by the protestors for the health issues of transexual and transgendered persons. There was, however, a lot of misdirected rage. I've felt that rage too, for despite the claims of the protestors that the panel did not contain "veterans of the decades-long struggle to advance the rights of our people, who can speak from hard-won experience," I have been dealing with my own transsexualism my entire life. I have been on the street, banned from my house at age eighteen by my parents. I have been repeatedly denied medical care. I have had to fight for my right to self-definition. I have been persecuted because of my transsexualism.

The takeover of the Transgender Health Symposium was not born out of concern for transgender and transexual health issues. It happened because of the decades-old rage of Margaret O'Hartigan against the transexual program at the University of Minnesota. It happened because her colossal ego caused her to believe that only she was capable of addressing transgender health issues. But most of all, it happened because she didn't care enough to set up her own symposium. The National Gay and Lesbian Health Association and other health care organizations are eager to learn more about transexual and transgender health issues. Margaret O'Hartigan and Christine Tayleur are perfectly capable of setting up their own forums. But it's so much easier to simply show up and take over someone else's.

How ironic that the protestors did not include those groups they claimed the panel did not represent. Their age range and incomes were similar to that of the panel. The young, the old, the homeless, and female-to-males were not represented in their numbers. The protestors did include people of color, but that is the only conceivable way in which they could be said to represent a diversity not found on the panel. What the claim that the panel were not "members of our community" really meant was that the panel were not in the protestors' in-group. The protestors saw a cheap and easy opportunity to get their moment of glory by walking on the backs of one of their brothers and two of their sisters, and did so.

The only silencing that occurred was done by the protestors. O'Hartigan shouted Drs. Bockting down. The three original panelists were unable to give the talks they had originally planned, due to time limitations placed on them by O'Hartigan. As a result of her experience in Minneapolis, Martine Rothblatt has sworn off transexual activism altogether, and Armand is reportedly feeling depressed and angry because he did not take action to stop the protest. I'm quite sure many members of the audience will think twice before attending another presentation about transsexualism, and I know that the Executive Director of the National Lesbian and Gay Health Association was not impressed with the antics of the protestors. I haven't spoken to Dr. Bockting since that night, but I don't imagine he will be any to eager to subject himself to such abuse again, either.

But hey, the protestors got their fifteen minutes of fame, and that's what it's all about anyway, isn't it?

Isn't it?

****

The following were the demands of the protestors who took over the Transgender Health Symposium.

SILENCE = DEATH

A death warrant for Minnesota's transsexuals was signed last month with passage of legislation abolishing state-funded sex-reassignment services -- and Walter Bockting and his University of Minnesota Transgender Services program were shamefully silent.

But such silence is nothing new -- in the 1970s the University program sat on the sidelines as two transsexuals sued for the right to receive adequate health care -- just as it remained silent while transsexuals found in 1978 and 1994 to defend those victories.

A different sort of silence is being perpetrated today -- the silence of censorship.

The "Trangender Health" symposium panel is NOT comprised of representatives of our community, despite claims that it is. Transsexuals are not just white, middle-age and middle-class. We are disabled. We are young. We are old. We are people of color and people living in poverty.

Where on the panel are transsexuals of color? Where are our youth? Where are our elders? Where are veterans of our decades long struggle to advance the rights of our people, who can speak from hard-won experience? Why are female-to-males outnumbered two to one?

Where are our representatives of our community on the panel?

They are excluded from the panel purporting to address our health needs, shut out by Walter Bockting, who avoided speaking out as our health care funding was demolished, only to usurp the legitimate voices of the transsexual community today.

The majority of transsexuals are excluded for the very same reasons they are always ignored: they are not college graduates and career-oriented professionals. They are rejected for not having decades of white, male professional privilege to legitimize them.

They are silenced because they are runaways -- or throw-aways. They are blue and pink collar workers. They are whores, exposing themselves to AIDS in a desperate gamble to earn money for surgery before getting sick. They are living on the streets. They are drinking and drugging themselves in a futile attempt to alleviate their pain.

We are living in war time. Our health care repealed, we can not -- we must not-- tolerate "business as usual." The same university program which denied impoverished transsexuals health care until forced to relent by court order must not be allowed to continue its shameful history of abuse and neglect by deciding who should be heard from and who should be silenced.

Help us to open the panel so we can speak for ourselves!

STOP THE SILENCE!

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It should be noted that transsexuals in the audience said over the microphone that Dr. Bockting had spoken out about the action of the Minnesota legislature to eliminate state funding of transsexual surgery. It should also be noted that he is a young man, and was a teenager in the late seventies, when Margaret O'Hartigan was having her run-in with the gender program at the University of Minnesota.

Reading through the rhetoric, it is quite clear that the demands make no sense in a forum in which people were eager to address health issues, and in which the protestors had been told they would have an opportunity to speak. -- Dallas Denny

Dallas Denny

Dallas Denny is a Licensed Psychological Examiner and a member of the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association, Inc. and of the Society for the Scientific Study of Sex. She is founder and executive director of the American Educational Gender Information Service, Inc., (AEGIS) a national clearinghouse for information about gender dysphoria, publisher of ***Chrysalis****, and founder of Atlanta Gender Explorations. She has been previously published in many magazines and a number of peer-reviewed professional journals. Her books* ***Gender Dysphoria: A Guide to Research and Identity Management in Transsexualism*** *were published in early 1994.*

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