

## local news

## New survey changes trans politics, activists say

Southern Comfort conference  
'huge success,' according to  
organizers

By JENNIFER J. SMITH

A new national survey released at the annual Southern Comfort transgender conference in Atlanta last week shows American voters may be more progressive on transgender issues than activists previously thought, according to the Human Rights Campaign.

"I wouldn't have thought people had focused on this issue that much," said David Smith, HRC communications director. "I think the survey showed there is still a lot of confusion, but generally there is an awareness there that was a pleasant surprise."

Released by HRC officials and participating transgender researcher Mara Keisling during a Sept. 21 seminar at Southern Comfort, the survey was commissioned by HRC for \$75,000, according to Smith.

According to the survey, 61 percent of 800 randomly selected voters around the country believe the United States needs laws to protect transgendered people from discrimination.

In addition, 57 percent incorrectly believe that it is not legal to fire people just because they are transgendered, and 67 percent agree that it is possible for a per-



Activist Mara Keisling cautioned transgender groups from 'moving too quickly into conclusions' about HRC's survey results. (Photo courtesy IFGE)

The federal Employment Non-Discrimination Act, dubbed ENDA, remains pending in the U.S. Congress. It would ban job discrimination on the basis of "sexual orientation," but not "gender identity."

"The transgender community cannot hide like many in the gay community if we so choose," said Monica Helms, director of Trans=Action, a Georgia trans advocacy group. "We are the most visible and vulnerable in this fight, yet we are not in ENDA."

"I hope this survey helps to change that," she said.

Keisling, a transgender activist in

"At the time opinion polls showed 60 to 70 percent support for lifting the ban, but we underestimated the power of the opposition. I don't want us to do that here," he said.

### Job bias, hate crimes key issues at confab

In addition to the survey presentation, several seminars at Southern Comfort focused on the growing political activism in the transgender community.

Activists differed on how quickly they thought transgender job protections will be won.

"I think it would be nice to think that all of the success we're having on the local level with gender inclusion should equate to getting federal legislation passed," Keisling said in a seminar Sept. 20. "But that's not the way Washington works."

Angela Brightfeather, a panel member and transgender activist from North Carolina, disagreed.

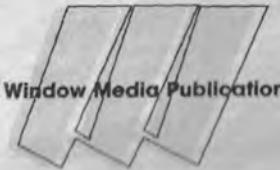
"I've been fighting this fight since I was 20 years old. I'm now 57, and by God I'm going to have legal protection before I die," she said. "We will get it passed in Washington, and it will be people like us who finally make it happen."

Peter Oiler, a heterosexual cross-dresser who was fired from his job as a truck driver for grocery giant Winn-Dixie for "wearing a dress on my own time," chaired a seminar on employment discrimination Sept. 20.

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In addition, 57 percent believe that it is not legal to fire people just because they are transgendered, and 67 percent agree that it is possible for a person to be born as one sex, but inside feel like another sex.

"This is groundbreaking," Smith said. "I'm not aware of any other national survey on transgender issues, but that means it's the first time any pollster has attempted to look at this issue, so we're advising caution."

## Survey prompts ENDA debate

Transgendered activists who attended the survey release at Southern Comfort hailed the results.

"It's proof of what we've been saying all along — if America is ready for gay rights, they're ready for transgender rights," said Dallas Denny, a longtime activist in Atlanta. "I take this as proof we need to include gender identity in ENDA, and this makes it a lot harder for groups to argue trans-inclusion is going to cost legislative votes."

"I hope this survey helps to change that," she said.

Keisling, a transgender activist in Pennsylvania who has helped successfully pass four gender identity inclusive local ordinances just this year, said such conclusions "are jumping the gun."

"I respect all of these women, but I think it's dangerous to say this survey supports our inclusion in ENDA," Keisling said. "This is a tool to educate people on the issues. ENDA is not the end all be all of our issues." HRC's Smith agrees.

"I thought going into this we were going to get a red light," he said. "But it certainly isn't the green light some think it is. At best it's yellow, and I think we should be very happy with that."

Smith cautioned against proceeding on gender inclusion "too quickly."

"If we've learned anything from the last 10 years, one of the key lessons from the gays in the military battle is that in the short term pushing an issue the country isn't ready for can cause severe lasting damage," Smith said.

"wearing a dress on my own time, chaired a seminar on employment discrimination Sept. 20.

U.S. District Judge Lance Africk ruled Sept. 17 in favor of Winn-Dixie Stores Inc., which fired Oiler in 1999 after 21 years of employment.

"It was very hard talking about that just after the court decision," Oiler said afterwards. "But people need to be warned to be careful, that what happened to me could happen to them, and it still does happen."

While scheduled at 9 a.m. Friday morning — "the worst time slot available at a gender conference," Oiler joked — approximately 20 enthusiastic attendees participated.

"It's incredibly scary to me, hearing his story," said a conference-goer who wished only to be identified as "Robin." "You see all this evidence that we've made all this progress, and people tell you 'Come out! Come out!' and then you see the court condemning a man because he wore a dress on his own time.

"I have to protect my livelihood and my family," Robin said. "People sometimes forget it's the 21st century when you're talking about transgender issues."

Pauline Mitchell, the mother of slain Navajo gay "Two-Spirit" teenager Fred C. Martinez, Jr., also spoke at Southern Comfort, giving the keynote address Sept. 21.

Mitchell received an award from Southern Comfort and GenderPAC "commemorating her leadership and courage for speaking out against violence against our youth," organizers said.

Almost 550 people attended the conference, "making it our second largest ever," founder Sabrina Marcus said. "We'll be back up to pre-9-11 numbers next year."

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### To submit a letter:

Letters should be fewer than 400 words and may be edited for content and length. All submissions must include a name and phone number for verification.



While politics and activism had a large presence in programming at this year's Southern Comfort seminars, hair, voice and makeup sessions were still big favorites. (Photo by R.O. Youngblood)

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