

Protestors Disrupt, Take Over Transgender Symposium at National Lesbian & Gay Health Conference

A transgender health symposium held on June 18, 1995 and organized by Dr. Walter Bockting of the University of Minnesota's Program in Human Sexuality (PHS) for the 17th National Lesbian and Gay Health Conference in Minneapolis, Minnesota was taken over by transgender protestors on the grounds that the symposium's panel was "not comprised of representatives of our community, despite claims that it is." The panel consisted of Martine Rothblatt, Dallas Denny, both post-operative transsexuals, and Armand Hotimsky, an FtM transsexual. All three panelists are long-term transgender activists.

Before the symposium's start, protestors handed out materials documenting problems with health care for transgendered persons. Some of the information had been published by Ms. Denny. As Dr. Bockting was making introductory comments, Margaret O'Hartigan, who had seated herself without invitation with the panelists, began to read a prepared statement concerning the recent abolishing of government funding for transsexual surgery in Minnesota. O'Hartigan accused Bockting of "remaining shame-

fully silent" about the funding cuts and demanded that all transgender and transsexual persons present be given equal opportunity to speak. Bockting pointed out that 45 minutes had been set aside for this. But when protestors imported from San Francisco and Pennsylvania came forward and sat at the panelists' table, Bockting left the stage, turning the program over to the original panelists.

O'Hartigan seized the opportunity, announcing that all speakers, including the original three panelists, would be given ten minutes. Martine Rothblatt spoke first, cutting short the slide show based on her book *The Apartheid of Sex* and left the room. Denny then took the podium, but was interrupted by O'Hartigan, who announced that Mecale Little of Action Aids in Philadelphia would be the next speaker. O'Hartigan capitulated when members of the audience called out, "Let her [Denny] speak."

Denny spoke of the many ways in which transsexual and transgender people are oppressed; much of her talk focused on health care issues faced by sex workers and individuals on the street. At one point, Christine Tayleur,

a protestor who was acting as sergeant at arms, told Denny her time was up, but Denny concluded at her leisure and went into the audience to sit beside Bockting to show her support.

The various protestors each spoke briefly, expounding on the problems Denny had mentioned earlier. Armand Hotimsky, the third of the invited panelists, was the last speaker; he described the health care problems of transgendered and transsexual people in France and other countries. Afterwards, the few audience members left asked questions. Denny, Hotimsky, and the protesting "panelists" took turns responding. Several members of the audience, themselves transgendered, spoke in support of Bockting and PHS.

After the symposium, a number of attendees expressed their regret that the educational content of the symposium had been overshadowed by politics. Many of them had pressing practical needs because of their ongoing work with transgendered clients. "How ironic," one of them said, "The supposed concern of the protestors has resulted in a net negative impact on health care of this population."

Denny was not surprised at the action. "Margaret O'Hartigan has been agitating to be on the panel. I suspected something like this might happen," Denny said. "This action was not born out of concern for transsexual and transgendered persons," she continued, "It is... about O'Hartigan's long-standing grudge with PHS. The other protestors were duped."

Denny seconded the protestors' concern that persons of color were not represented on the original panel. "Classism and racism are an ongoing problem in the community," she said, "but to destroy a symposium which was put together to address just those issues is insane. Dr. Bockting is to be commended for putting the panel together, and for his grace under fire."



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