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"For Transsexuals, 1994 is 1969"
by John Gallagher

Transgendered activists are a minority fighting to be heard within the gay and lesbian community

As organizers for the Stonewall 25 march were completing their preparations, they found themselves facing a potentially embarrassing threat from an unexpected source. Angry at having been excluded from the march's formal title—the International March on the United Nations to Affirm the Human Rights of Lesbian and Gay People—transgendered activists were planning to stage civil disobedience actions on the march route.

"It was a symptom of the mainstream (gay and lesbian) community's trying to get civil rights passed by not accepting the whole community," says Denise Norris, a member of Transsexual Menace, a direct-action group in New York City.

The protest was called off less than 24 hours before the march, but not until the activists felt their point had been made. "We caused the Stonewall people a lot of stress for not including us in the title," says Phyllis Randolph Frye, executive director of the International Conference on Transgender Law and Employment Policy, a Houston-based group.

The group signaled the beginning of a newfound political activism. "It was our own Stonewall this year," contends Riki Anne Wilchins, a member of Transsexual Menace. "For transsexual 1994 is 1969."

But the political emergence of the transgender community, defined by activists to include not only transsexuals but also individuals who dress in drag or cross-dress, may not be a smooth one. As the contretemps over Stonewall 25 indicated, the gay community may find the proposed alliance an uneasy one at best.

"We've already seen the mixed feelings," says Ann Northrop, a lesbian activist from New York City. "Conservatives want

a homogenous image and are afraid to embrace the transgender community because they think that's going to screw up our ability to gain civil rights."

The increased notice given to transgender concerns has been nurtured by a growing societal interest in gender issues, argues Eve Sedgwick, a professor of English at Duke University who writes about gender theory. "The work of the (transgender) community has kept those issues visible," she says. "It has made them seem real to people and not just theoretical."

The events surrounding Stonewall 25 indeed marked a turning point, and not just because of the march gaffe. Gay Games IV also became a focus of controversy, adopting a detailed policy for transsexual participation that dealt with such matters as legal name changes and the length of time the athlete had been taking hormones. But when one transsexual inquired about participating in the games, recalls Norris, the event's representative addressed her as "mister" and "sir." "A few of us got very upset," she says.

Transsexual activists subsequently distributed flyers reading GAY GAMES TO TRANSSEXUALS: DROP DEAD. After meeting with transgender activists, the Gay Games board voted to drop the guidelines and to allow athletes to participate in events under whatever gender they declared.

"People were concerned that the system would be abused, but as far as I know, there were no problems," says Northrop, a member of the Gay Games board. "Everybody seemed happy, and I'm proud the Games took a progressive step."

"The transgender community is much more activist and more organized as a result of (the Stonewall controversy)," insists Frye. "We've been organized for a long time for social and support events, but as far as demanding our rights, it's still in the early stages."

Buoyed by their successes and by the explosion of books by transgendered authors, activists are expanding their strategies. In New York City organizers

are developing a big brother/big sister outreach to gay street youth, many of whom are transgendered. In addition, a national political and health conference is being planned for next year.

Some activists also intend to mount an action at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival this summer, where a three-year debate has been raging about whether transsexuals should be allowed to participate. One transsexual was barred from the festival in 1991, while five more were excluded two years ago, ostensibly for security reasons. This year transgendered activists plan to have their own encampment near the festival—Camp Trans, which will be the site of 18 to 20 workshops over a four-day period.

"It's not about forcing them to bow to our terms," says Norris. "If they're nice enough to gather 7,000 women together for us, we're going to be nice enough to camp across the street and have a hell of a good time with everyone who wants to join us."

The increased visibility also includes at least one transgendered candidate seeking political office. Karen Ann Kerin, a Vermont Republican, is seeking election to the state's house of representatives. An engineer who travels frequently to Muslim countries on business, Kerin says that her political activism began when she tried without success to change her sex legally in order to avoid the apparent discrepancy on her passport.

"I determined that the only thing to do is to get elected and make noise from a higher platform," she says. "People who know me know all about it and have no problem with it. I don't go out of my way to enunciate it on the platform at large."

Frye maintains that individuals beginning sex reassignment are often subject to discrimination. Most nondiscrimination ordinances provide little relief from such problems.

"We need to stress to lawmakers and activists that the phrase sexual orientation does not include transgendered people unless it is specifically defined to include us," says Frye. Of the eight states with sexual orientation nondiscrimination

laws, only Minnesota provides protections for transsexuals.

While transgendered activists may feel ignored by government, they could be drawing attention from less welcome sources. A proposed antigay initiative in Washington also includes a clause that defines an individual's gender as fixed at birth.

Dallas Denny, executive director of the American Educational Gender Information Service, a national clearinghouse, believes that such proposals by the religious right underscore the connection between the transgender and gay communities. "Those people don't distinguish between us," she argues. "We have to come together to work for the common good because if we're fragmented, we'll be easy to pick off."

"The emergence of the transgender movement has forced the hand in the card game," notes activist Leslie Feinberg, a drag king and author of the novel *Stone Butch Blues*. "Are we going to be estranged from one another, or are we going to fight together and still have autonomy as movements? What's escalating the urgency is that we're up against the same enemies."

But if past attempts to forge a coalition are any indication, the effort will not be easy. Frye recalls an unsuccessful battle in the mid '80s to have the word transgendered included in the title of a local gay group in Houston.

"It was a very bitter fight from people I had marched with for ten years," she says. "I consider myself a lesbian, but these people were saying that transgendered had nothing to do with the (gay) movement. It was really ugly and very hurtful." As a result, continues Frye, "I've pretty much become a transgendered activist only, which is sad. I'm having to fight with my natural allies."

The push for transgender rights developed in the '80s as support and social groups for transsexuals began to form, says Denny. "It's not like we weren't there," she says. "We were just incommunicado."

It has been only in the past decade

that transsexuals have been talking among themselves. Previously, says Denny, "doctors thought we should go back into society. It was a state of being in two closets. One was similar to that of gay people, the closet of self-acceptance. The other was the closet at the end of the rainbow, where people were assimilated. It's only recently that people have taken a stand after the process."

But the struggle within the transgender community may be uphill as well. To begin with, not all its members identify with gay activism. "Within the transgender movement not everyone is gay, lesbian, or bisexual," observes Feinberg. "There is certainly a huge heterosexual population that is transgendered." Even some segments of the gay community claimed by transgendered activists, such as drag

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queens, may not always agree with the designation.

Moreover, not all transgendered individuals welcome the high profile of Christine Jorgensen, the pioneering transsexual who lectured extensively and became a media celebrity in the early '50s. "There's a lot of assimilationist attitude among transgendered people," says Denny, who is also the author of *Gender Dysphoria: A Guide to Research*, which she describes as the first scientific work on gender issues by someone who is

transgendered. "One friend of mine told me, 'I can't afford to be seen at these kind of events.'"

"There are segments in both the (transgender) community and the gay community that want mainstream acceptance and perceive these other segments as doing harm to their chances of being accepted," says Norris. "They eagerly point fingers at the other community and say it's not part of our community."

And the activists themselves are engaged in a debate about whether the old norm of trying to appear nontranssexual is valid. "There's a real split going on in the transsexual community," says Wilchins. "The younger cohort coming up says passing does not work. 'I don't have to be a real woman; I can be a transsexual woman.' Older transsexuals say that's not what they're about."

Denny regards the emphasis on passing as a nontranssexual as a form of "internalized transphobia." She says, "It was very damaging because many people didn't have the physical attributes to do it successfully. Now people are saying it's all right to be this way, that in fact it's a fine way to be."

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Although not everyone accepts such views, says Denny, disagreements are to be expected. "It's not any worse or any better than any other group of people," she points out. "It's like the leather issue in the gay community, or when gay liberation started and there was lesbian self-exclusion. We're just thrashing those things out because we're new and just getting into the dialogue."

Despite such potential pitfalls, Frye remains optimistic. "Five years ago I was pretty disillusioned," she says. "Now so many leaders and activists are coming up, I see nothing but progress ahead."