

Meeting the Information Needs of Transsexual People

The S in AEGIS stands for service, and that's what the organization has always been about — providing service. Since our inception in 1990, we have strived to make high quality information available for free or at low cost to transsexual men and women so they can make informed decisions about their lives. We've been remarkably successful on many fronts, but we're proudest of having played a significant role in the lives of thousands of transsexual and transgendered men and women who have contacted us. The information and referrals we have provided have helped many transsexuals learn about themselves and make wise decisions as they have embarked upon the difficult process of reassigning their sex. We have steered thousand of folks to caring and competent professionals who helped them put life-changing plans into effect. We have watched in amazement as males have become women, females have become men, and an increasing number of people have found comfortable space somewhere in between the two traditional genders.

You see, we have always known that it is not doctors who change the sex of transsexuals; transsexuals do it themselves. Transsexuals have been changing their sex for nearly fifty years, in ever increasing numbers, and they have been becoming more competent in going about it as they learn from those who have gone before. AEGIS and its predecessor organizations have touched somewhat more than twenty thousand lives, giving support and information that in many cases have given transsexuals the start they needed. We've watched in awe as those who contacted us in despair began to take control of their lives and proceed through sex reassignment and eventual surgery. It's common for someone who calls us, full of doubt and misery, having decided to come to terms with their transsexualism, to be back in touch a year later for information about name change or to get suggestions for dealing with their employer when they go full time; then call us a year after that for referral to a surgeon, to call us a year or two after that for advice with their relationships;

and to emerge, somewhere in this process, as a new community leader.

Of course, AEGIS is not the only source of support for transsexual people, but we have a barrel full of letters from people thanking us for being there and telling us that it was their contact with us which started a process of change and growth in their lives. Some have called on us only a few times. We held the hands of others all along the route. We are the only national organization with a primary focus on transsexual people (in fact, several national and local community organizations are known for being abusive to transsexuals who happen to call them). We know our work is critical, and we have done it well.

We've helped hundreds of professionals, too, by alerting them to the many problems with the medical and psychological literature, by giving them referrals to up-to-date books and papers, and by the provision of hands-on training which helps them to be compassionate and non-controlling therapists. We've watched therapists we have educated grow into empathetic, knowledgeable professionals who effect the lives of dozens of transsexual and transgendered clients.

Our work has had a considerable impact on the literature as well, both in what we have written ourselves, and in giving others the tools they need to write. *Chrysalis* has been influential, and even articles from *AEGIS News* have been quoted in the professional literature. Our director's annotated bibliography appeared in print in 1994, weighing in at more than 650 pages, and she has an edited text which was just published. Our work has helped to de-demonize transsexual and transgendered people, and has helped lead directly to a more empathetic and caring literature.

And we've done so much more — our National Transgender Library & Archive is, so far as we know, the largest publicly available collection of trans-related material in the world. We've held dozens of seminars and workshops. We've played a significant role in the starting of three conferences — Southern Comfort, the International Congress on

Sex and Gender Issues, and the FTM Conference of the Americas. We've produced medical advisory bulletins and public service advertisements, warning about medical problems which affect transpeople and about which no one else has seemed particularly concerned. We've placed articles in trans-community magazines, alerting the community to medical dangers.

We know our information is first rate. Over eight years, we've built a mighty library with a 300+ page holding list. We maintain an extensive database of over 3000 caregivers and service organizations, and a bibliography of over 10,000 books and articles about transsexualism. We've published a first-rate magazine, three newsletters, and several books, mailed out tens of thousands of information packets, produced a variety of educational material, and given away thousands of booklets and pamphlets. We've sold thousands of books through our mail-order bookstore. We've spoken to journalists, helping them shape their stories and articles (and in some cases, their books) in a respectful manner, and convinced television talk show producers to trashcan some absurd ideas for shows featuring transpeople. We've attended more than 30 national transgender conferences. We've written hundreds of letters in support of transpersons in crisis, applauded those who treated transfolk fairly in print, and criticized those who have attacked or ridiculed us.

We've been influential in other ways as well — our Executive Director was successful in gaining membership in the Harry Benjamin Association over the objection of the then HBGDA Director that she was "just" a transsexual, and so was undeserving of membership; and she was among the first transsexuals to get something other than an autobiography into print. We've been an important voice in transforming the treatment setting from one in which we were grateful for and unquestioning of whatever courtesies and services professionals chose to give us to one in which we have the same rights as other consumers — believe it, in 1990, this was not the case.

Along the way, we realized that it was not only transsexuals who needed our information, but anyone who was interested in changing their gender presentations, and in particular, anyone who was desirous of changing their body with hormones and other technologies. In 1993, we changed our mission statement so that we served transgendered people as well as those who identified as transsexuals — while continuing to focus on the needs of transsexual persons.

We did what we could on a budget which never exceeded \$30,000. If we had had more money, more volunteers, or more time, we could have done even more. Still, AEGIS has had a wonderful tenure, and we have accomplished so much.

And now things are changing. The community has grown so much that a national organization with an annual budget of \$25,000 cannot possibly keep up with the volume of requests for information. And at a time when we need to increase our income, we find it is falling off. Our old financial strategies are not working in this age of the Internet.

Quite frankly, we have been so successful that it is now time to re-invent ourselves. Consider our once-controversial mission statement:

The American Educational Gender Information Service, Inc. (AEGIS) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit clearinghouse for transsexual and transgender issues. AEGIS actively supports the professionalization and standardization of services for transsexual and transgendered persons; promotes non-judgmental, non-discriminatory treatment of persons with gender issues; advocates respect for their dignity, their right to treatment, and their right to choose their gender role; helps transsexual and transgendered persons make reasoned and informed decisions about the ways in which they will live their lives; and provides educational materials, information, and referrals.

The mission statement, so bold in 1990, seems rather ho-hum in 1997. Of course we have the right to make our own

decisions about our lives. Of course we have the right to be treated with respect. In 1990, I guarantee you, this was hardly even conceivable, even by transsexuals themselves. Our mission statement is clearly in need of an overhaul — and that's a sign of our how successful we've been. It's the best thing that could have happened.

We believe it's time for a change, for a metamorphosis, for a re-envisioning of this organization so that we can better meet the needs of transsexual and transgendered people; either that, or it's time to shake hands all around and go home. The transcommunity has grown so much, the situation has changed so much, that we must change or perish. And besides that, our Executive Director has made it clear that she is darn tired of carrying the load mostly by herself and would like some relief. After all, she has had what amounts to a second full-time job, at which she has worked without pay for nearly ten years.

So what is AEGIS to become? We're not sure. We do know we have lots of options. We could close up shop, although we don't want to do that. Or, we could shut down our other services and concentrate on information and referrals only (we don't want to do that, either). We could farm out the help line to another organization and concentrate on publishing, or on building the library. We could turn increasingly to educating professionals. We could send out a "we need your support" letter, begging money from the community because we have a fiscal emergency. Or, we can go to the drawing board and reinvent ourself in a major way — one which is to the best of what we believe in our hearts and our minds to be what the community wants and needs.

We plan to do just that. Our Director has called on the Board of Directors to take AEGIS to its next phase. And the Directors will be calling on the community, both to let us know its needs and to give its financial and emotional support of our forthcoming transition — and from the community, our next Executive Director will emerge.

It's unclear exactly what will happen. Perhaps we'll find a new focus. Perhaps we'll merge with one or more

existing organizations. Perhaps we'll downsize. Perhaps we'll close up shop. Perhaps — hopefully — we'll change and flourish. One thing we know for sure — we want to know what you want, and we want to give it to you.

Of course, I would like for AEGIS to flourish and grow — it's been my baby, after all, for these past eight years. If it grows, I plan to let go of the reins and let it soar, with a new Executive Director at the helm. I'll still be involved, of course, but I won't be calling the shots, except perhaps as a member of the Board. It's a change I initiated, and one I will ensure will happen. AEGIS is the community's organization, not mine, and for that reason it must stand on its own. This is sort of a zen thing about nonprofits; eventually, the control must go from the founder to a strong Board of Directors which will make policy, and an Executive Director who will carry out that policy.

When we move into the next phase, we will come to the community to share our new vision and ask for its support. We hope to have the support of the community. If we don't — well, then perhaps our vision doesn't match the community's needs — although our preliminary information suggests that it does (see the accompanying article, which is an analysis of our membership survey). So unless our fundraising efforts fall flat (your way of telling us adios), we're going to stick around and we're going to do our best to be what everyone wants us to be. We want AEGIS to be everyone's organization.

It's for that reason — to help us plan for the future based on feedback from the community, so that we can meet the real needs of real people — that we have enclosed a questionnaire asking what you think we should become, and what you will support. We want your feedback — and more than that — we want your time and energy, your ideas, and, when the time comes, your financial support. Please fill in the form and return it to us. We will use it for our planning, and we will send the data to any other organization which wants it so they can also use it for planning.

After all, we're in this together!

— Dallas