

'Helping Professions' Meet a Sexual Minority

By Lyn Rosen

The Outreach Foundation presented a training workshop on gender identity and cross-dressing for area members of the helping professions last weekend. Approximately 15 counsellors, sex therapists, hotline counsellors and sex education teachers met at the Phillips Brooks House in Harvard Square to learn more about the transvestite (TV), transsexual (TS) and Transgender (TG) subculture.

The Friday evening and Saturday workshops were co-facilitated by Outreach Foundation consultants and members of the transvestite and transgender cultures appearing as their "sister identities" (dressed as their feminine selves). For many present this was their first experience in talking to a member of the culture who was not experiencing problems because of cross-dressing. Friday evening's workshop became a period of adjustment in which the questions were directed mainly to the TV or TG in trying to understand the feelings of the people involved in the subculture.

After a video-tape presentation of the Woman '76 show on cross-dressing and part of an earlier conference, the professionals met in small groups with facilitators and questioned them closely about their cross-dressing experiences: How did the clothes make them feel? Did they feel like they could not express their feminine side without wearing female-identified clothes? How did wives/lovers react? Why did so many transvestites dress in a style that seemed to portray the women of a past generation rather than the casual



Ariadne Kane

women of today?

Most cross-dressers expressed the feeling that wearing the traditional garb of women made them feel less tense, even to the point that their feminine personality became more outgoing than their masculine one. They spoke often of enjoying fabrics and materials that society frowns upon men wearing. Some felt that their use of make-up, stylized wigs, and nylons had much to do with the image of women in the era that they grew up; one expressed the feeling that younger generation cross-dressers may wear different clothing. Another stated that he believed if society would choose rough fabrics for women that cross-dressers would then wear rough fabrics in order

to express their feminine selves.

One felt a great need to be accepted as a woman when acting as "sister;" another said that for many transvestites merely dressing in women's clothing was satisfying whether others accepted them as a woman or not. The TVs present were heterosexual and some were presently married; others divorced. The one facilitator who expressed a desire to become transsexual said that he would choose men as sexual partners after the surgical change. All were extremely verbal; discussion was lively all evening.

The Saturday workshops focused mainly on the situations that the professionals may encounter in their work. Since these people would be dealing most often with those feeling *gender disforia* (a discomfort about their gender or their need to cross-dress), the discussion centered around people in the subculture with problems. The morning started with a role-play interview in which a troubled person came for counselling. In small group discussion ways of dealing with the client were discussed. Ariadne Kane, director of Outreach Foundation, gave a talk on the "superculture" which is the current term used by people to describe their culture. A quick course in good cross-dressing techniques was also given.

Later in the day small groups met to discuss the issues that participating members felt were still unexplored. One counsellor asked if there were alternatives to cross-dressing that would satisfy the client's need to present his feminine self. It was generally conceded that there was no substitute in the cross-dresser's mind for wearing clothing traditionally-associated with the opposite sex. As facilitator Paula expressed it, "An effeminate Paul would just not be acceptable.

I need the entire personality of sister." Other counsellors presented hypothetical cases, and facilitators gave advice and expressed their feelings. By the end of the day the questions seemed to deal mainly with how to help the person feeling anxiety about gender to cope with it, rather than with the feelings of those people who are happy with their choices.

As Paula said, "I am a happy dresser, not a cross-dresser."

More information on the "superculture" of the TV, TS and TG is available by writing to the Outreach Foundation at TV Outreach, Suite 433, 102 Charles St., Boston, MA 02114. Other suggested resources were Deborah Feinbloom's book *Transvestites and Transsexuals: A Mixed View*, the Gender Identity Service at 80 Boylston St. in Boston. Good hotline help may be gotten by calling Samaritans or the Sex Hotline (617) 620-0438 on Thursdays from 7 p.m. to 10 p.m. Counsellors from both hotlines were present at the conference.

White House

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Bryant, who is president of Save Our Children, Inc.

After the lengthy meeting the gay representatives were taken on a special tour of the White House including the Oval Office. Bruce Voeller of the National Gay Task Force noted that the reception in the Roosevelt Room was a "special privilege." "Usually such meetings take place in the Executive Office Building," he said.

The representatives plan to return to the White House in September for a follow-up meeting. Costanza noted that following that meeting she would welcome a request to meet with President Carter himself.

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