

The Importance of Outside Communication to the Transgendered Inmate

by V. Maulsby (Mikki)

As we are all aware, gay and lesbian prisoners are usually singled out for abuse by both inmates and staff. What has seemingly been ignored is how much worse this situation is for the transgendered inmate. As an openly gay but still closeted transgendered prisoner, perhaps I can share a few of the things I've learned in this decade in prison to give you on the outside some idea of why the transgendered inmate so desperately needs outside communication with compatible people.

First off, it is very dangerous to admit to anyone inside that one is transgendered. The abuse that comes after one comes out has caused two of my sisters here to commit suicide. Their courage cost them the mostly-imaginary protection of being one of the gays in prison. Inmates (both gay and straight) as well as the staff felt safe to heap abuse on them, free from any fear of censure. Some if not most of you who read this will remember the pain and anguish of being in the closet. Imagine having to deal with that as well as the normal abuses of the incarcerated. Without a safe understanding outside outlet, the pressure is often killing. Because a person on the outside can be told anything, the horrible mental pressure is eased by this conduit of communication. With an outsider to communicate with, the TS prisoner can endure the pain of the "closet" in which s/he must stay in order to be safe inside prison.

My own sanity was saved this way. Just as the pressure became almost more than I could stand, I learned about *GENDERTRASH*, a fab 'zine that comes from Canada. In a published letter I wrote to their editor, I came out as a TS, admitting my woman within and thereby easing the mental torture that was killing me. I did not stop there. As a poet, I began sending my work out signed with my femme name when appropriate. I then went on to "come out" to my friends on the outside, who were mostly gay. Many could not accept my open admission of transsexuality, and revived many of the old gay vs. TS debates that we've all heard ad nauseam. I admit it — I lost a lot of friends, folks I dearly loved — but that was the price of my sanity. Those friends that remain to me are like family. They know my darkest secret and still care for me. That knowledge in itself was priceless to my self-esteem.

The bottom line is this: minorities are more likely to be abused, and the TS prisoner, being a small subset of a minority, is in even greater danger and therefore greater need of help and support. Since most support services out there for gay and lesbian prisoners have little time, or — let's be honest — interest in the needs of the TS inmate, the only reasonable option left to the transgendered is communication with compatible outside people. Most gays don't

want to know about us, so lumping us in their support efforts is counter-productive at best. I can offer a personal example. When Mike Riegle was still with us and working on the GCN Prisoner Project, I had my name listed as a prisoner seeking a friend. I was very lucky to get almost a dozen responses. When time went by to get to know the people somewhat, and for them to get to know me, I admitted my woman within. With only one exception, they all simply stopped communicating without explanation. The exception was a gentleman who sent a postcard to tell me that my admission was the reason for his decision to cease communication. I hope you can imagine how devastating that was to my mental state, how it could bring one to the brink of suicide. That is what almost happened to me. If *GENDERTRASH* had not come my way, I would probably be dead by now, or an over-medicated zombie in the prison mental ward.

Another plus of outside communication, aside from mental health, is physical safety. As groups like *Amnesty International* have taught us, folks with outside contacts are less likely to be singled out by staff for serious abuse. While the staff may have no fear of the inmate, they are more likely to take care if there is any chance that an outside free person might hear about the abuse.

By now, some of those reading this are thinking about "scams" that some prisoners commit on outside people. The support I'm suggesting is letter contact — perhaps a holiday card — and not any form of monetary support. The real TS will respect this, and be grateful for the friendship and an understanding ear. On a related note, I can share how I spent two month's pay to send a so-called friend in Canada a wig. Yes, I got scammed. I never heard from the person again. Yet, I learned a valuable lesson and in no way tarred every outside person with the brush of being a scammer just because one was. I wonder how many outside folk can honestly say the same thing after being scammed by an inmate?

The bottom line is this: we transgendered inmates can only survive in prison with the help of outside understanding communication. Will you on the outside offer it?