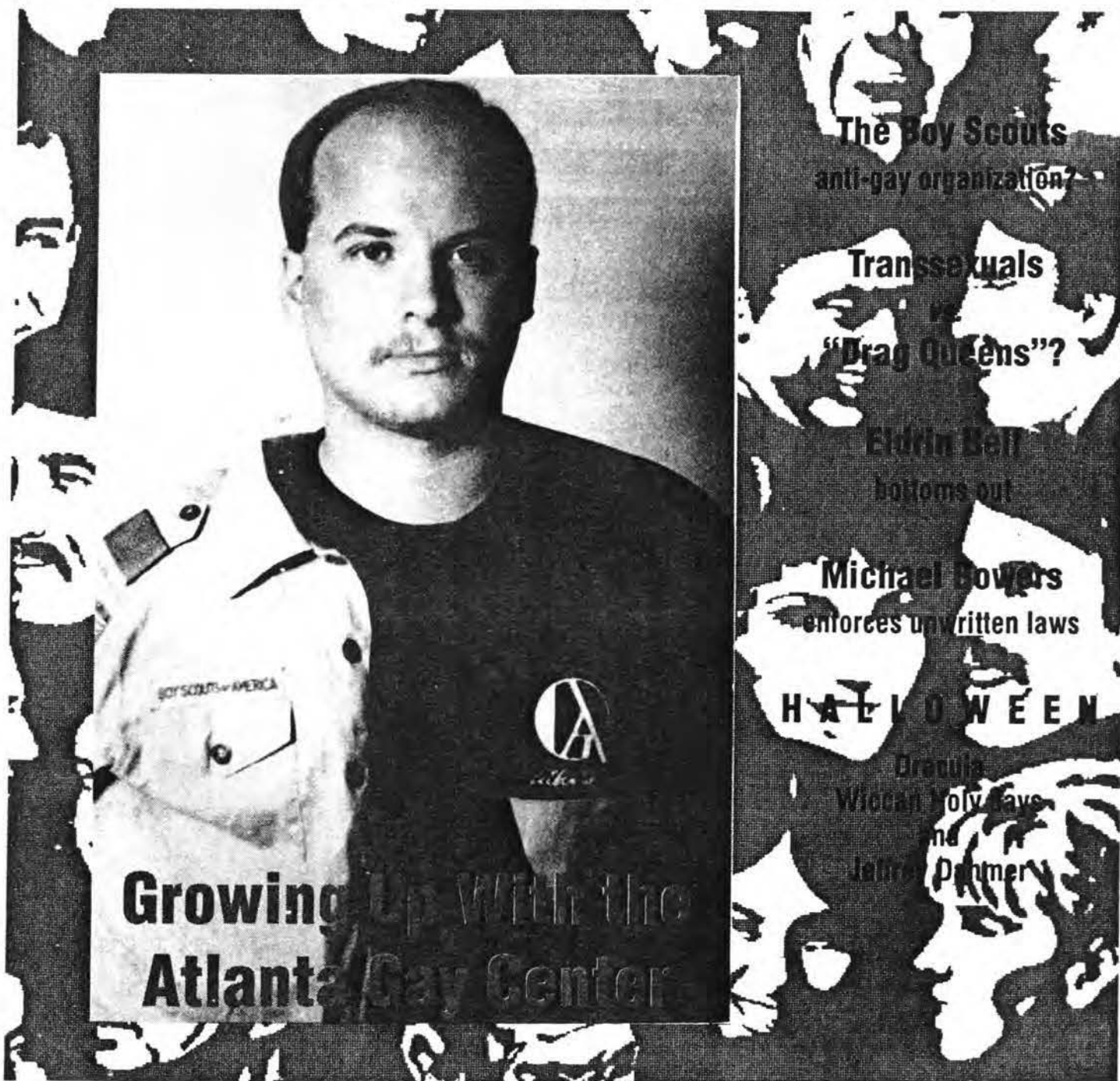


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The News

15th Anniversary ▼ Atlanta Gay Center ▼ 1976-1991



The Boy Scouts
anti-gay organization

Transsexuals
"Drag Queens"?

Eldrin Bell
bottoms out

Michael Bowers
enforces unwritten laws

HALLOWEEN

Dracula
Wiccan Holy Days
and
Jeffrey Dahmer

Growing up with the
Atlanta Gay Center

Atlanta's Oldest Publication for the Lesbian/Gay Community

[Author's note: Sharon closely resembles a person I once knew in another Southern city. I have simply transposed her to an Atlanta setting, and changed a few facts to protect her identity. She is not a real person, nor are the others here—but there are real people out there like them.]

From the left side, Sharon is striking. From the right, she seems subtly deformed, as if she had been born with a birth defect.

"The silicone moved," she says sorrowfully, holding a hand to her cheek. "I came in late one night, and my no-good boyfriend hit me with a beer bottle."

Sharon's body is a testament to back-room bodysculpting. She has had liquid silicone injected into her lips, chin, cheeks, forehead, breasts, thighs, and buttocks. "Honey, these drag-queen practitioners don't tell you what that shit does after a few years. Moves around. Comes out of your body through the nipples and pores. Gets into your knees and elbows and lungs and lymph nodes. Gets dragged down to your ankles by gravity. Takes a walk when it's hit with a beer bottle. I shouldn't have had it done. I knew it wouldn't last, but I wanted to be pretty right away, and I didn't have the money for a plastic surgeon. All the other girls were getting silicone, and it didn't seem to be hurting them. I figured I'd play then, pay later."

Sharon is paying now, in many ways. She has had to have a breast removed because of complications from the silicone. Her joints ache. She has periods of respiratory distress. And although she is not HIV-positive (which is miraculous, considering that despite a profusion of partners, she has never practiced safe sex), her white blood count is getting dangerously low. "Sometimes I think I won't see forty," she laments.

Sharon works as a female impersonator in an Atlanta show bar. The money was never good. Now, as always, she supplements her income by prostitution. "What I'd get, it'd go right up my nose. I never was able to save. I'd have boyfriends who would promise me they would give me money for the surgery, but when it came right down to it, most of them liked what I already had. They always found an excuse when it came time to cough up. I keep telling myself I'll start saving my money and have the surgery next year, but next year never comes."

Transgendered persons are for one reason or another uncomfortable with their present gender. In extreme cases, they wish to alter themselves to become as much as possible like the opposite sex. In popular parlance, this is known as a "sex change." Those who strongly and consistently want to change their sex are called transsexuals.

Sharon is transsexual, a genetic male who has wanted the body of a woman, to live as a woman, to be a woman for as long as she can remember. She didn't ask to be that way; it just happened. She doesn't know why she's transgendered, but that's no surprise—neither do scientists. Some say it's environment, some say it's genetics. Some say tomatoyes; some say tomahtoes.

Hormones and silicone have given Sharon a feminine outward shape, but she still has trouble passing in public, for she has masculine facial features, and her dark beard is difficult to conceal. She has never found the money for electrolysis or plastic surgery—although she has spent thousands of dollars for the silicone which is now causing major health problems. She lives a sort of twilight existence, semi-accepted by the gay community, seldom venturing out of Midtown. "Honey, I don't want others to do like I done. You tell them girls to get themselves straight."

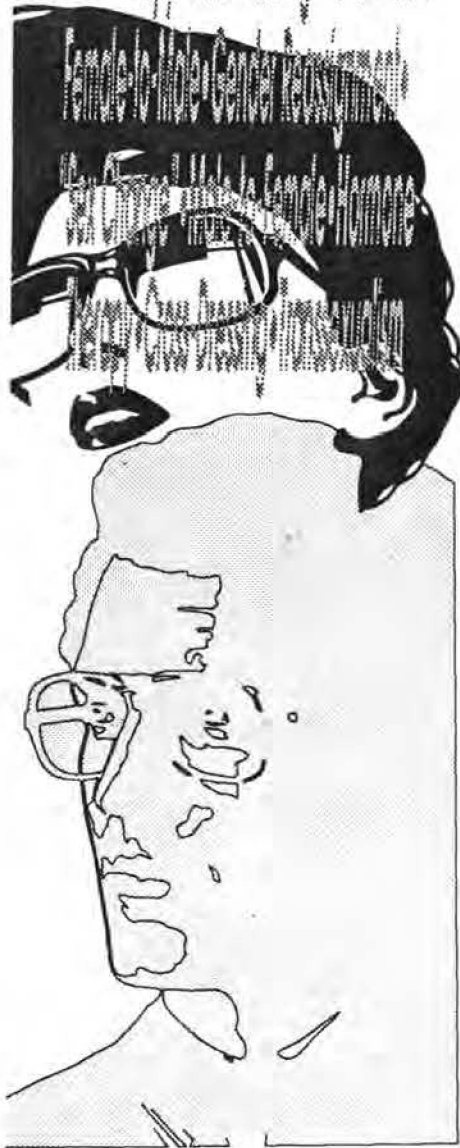
Most transgendered persons are not like Sharon. Many live entirely in the straight world. Some may visit a gay bar on occasion, because they feel comfortable there, but their jobs and their friends

A Field Guide to Persons in the



by Dallas Denny

Transgendered Gay Community



and their social lives are otherwise entirely outside of the gay community. Others live in the gay world, the same as Sharon, but the majority of those who do have more self-discipline and avoid her problems with drugs and alcohol, prostitution, abusive boyfriends, and silicone. Many of them eventually have sex reassignment surgery, and most of those who do move out of the gay community, into straight lifestyles.

A few transgendered persons are highly sexually active. Because of the high visibility of this minority, many men and women, straight and gay, assume that all transgendered persons are promiscuous. This is just not true. As a group, they are less sexually active than the general population. And their sexuality takes a variety of forms. Most are straight in their original incarnations; afterwards they

may prefer men or women—and if they prefer men, they almost invariably prefer straight men to gay men. They are not by any definition gay men, for they think of themselves as and often believe themselves to be women—except for transgendered females, who see themselves as men.

Confused? Want to know just who those people are that you have been seeing crossdressed in Lavita's and at Deana's One Mo' Time? Let's just take a tour of the Cove at four in the morning and see who's hanging out.

There: on the barstool is a blonde with false eyelashes and scarlet press-on nails and a Bob Mackie gown that looks as if it had been poured on. Nasty Nookie. Anyone with a name like Nasty Nookie—a name that shows hostility to women—is bound to be a drag queen.

And what is a drag queen? Easy. A drag queen is a gay man who dresses as a woman for purposes of attracting men, or to make money, or to make a political statement, or just to have a lark (so long as the lark is a male). There is no question about the maleness of a drag queen. They are not transgendered. See Nasty now, as she hitches up her skirt to move her unit from the left side to the right. She wants you to know what she has down there. Make no mistake about it; when you get her home and the clothes come off, you'll be in bed with a man, and maybe one who will want to be on top. She is making that clear to the fraternity type that she has chosen for her prey.

Drag queens can be stunning. They may shave their bodies to enhance the illusion of femininity, be experts with makeup and beadwork and wig styling, and move with the grace of a high fashion model. But they always manage to shatter the illusion. They are as flamboyant as their names. And unquestionably male.

Of course, not all female illusionists are drag queens, as I have defined them—although many people in the gay community mistakenly consider any genetic male in a dress to be a drag queen. The defining characteristic of what I would call a drag queen is hostility toward women, and love of men. Transgendered persons do not display this hostility toward women, although they may share the drag queen's love of men.

Looking wistfully at Nasty Nookie is someone named Sylvia. Sylvia is six-foot-three and built like a linebacker, wearing a dress that would look better on her grandmother. Her wig sits askew on her bullet-shaped head, and six coats of war paint aren't hiding her five o'clock (or in this case, four AM) shadow. She teeters unsteadily on four-inch heels, her big hairy hands clutching a black patent-leather purse that screams of five-year-olds on Easter Sunday.

Sylvia turns and whispers something to Bette, the woman who is with her. Bette is pretty, feminine, well-groomed, five-six and one-thirty pounds. Expensively dressed, she looks like a

politician's wife who has decided to go slumming—or maybe she is Sylvia's wife. But why is her voice so deep?

Sylvia and Bette are heterosexual crossdressers—that is, men who sometimes dress as women. Both are married (well, Sylvia is divorced, for her wife discovered her special suitcase one day and just couldn't handle it and went home to Momma and is now living in L.A. with Sylvia's best old ex-friend Ray). Bette, a ruggedly masculine carpenter in her other life, is a father of two, a good provider, a loving husband. Sylvia is a vice-president of a bank and smokes cigars when not crossdressed. Neither has ever had a homosexual experience—or wanted one—although Bette, because of her beauty, has had plenty of propositions. As Bette, she feels like a woman, and she has fantasized about being made love to by a man, and has even thought from time to time about a sex change. But she loves her family, and she enjoys being a man, and Bette will remain a celibate, part-time phenomenon.

Sylvia and Bette enjoy dressing as women. They do as good a job as they are able, although Bette is obviously the more accomplished. They are at the Cove because Sylvia would cause an uproar if she were to appear anywhere else. She feels comfortable at the Cove. Accepted. Not understood, for the majority of gay men assume that she is gay, but accepted. Safe. Free from bashing or public humiliation.

Under the lights, Andrea and Samantha are playing pool with two young men who are having trouble keeping their hands off of each other. Andrea, her hair cut short in a bob, wears little makeup, and is dressed in jeans and t-shirt. She comes off as what Samantha calls a DWA—a dyke with an attitude—which is exactly the image Andrea wants to project. She likes to scowl at anyone who pays attention to Samantha.

Sam is dressed in the clothes she wore to work; a skirt and blouse and pumps. She wears her hair to her shoulders, and has accentuated her just-short-of-beautiful features with makeup. She is a knockout, in a girl-next-door sort of way.

Andrea and Samantha are pre-operative transsexual people. Or maybe they're post-op. Who can tell? They both live and work as women, and have for years. They look and sound like other women. They have no beards. They have breasts. They have worked hard to change their bodies and their social circumstances, and it has worked. Their former lives as males are but distant memories. This morning, they found themselves still ready to party after The Otherside closed, and wended their way to the Cove. They're not here for sexual reasons—they've been sleeping with each other for more than two years—but because the Cove, an old haunt back when they were in transition, was the first place they thought of when they decided to put the party on the road.

The woman watching the pool game is Brooke, who finds Sam attractive but isn't about to risk telling her for fear of that DWA with her. Brooke is a genetic female, living as a lesbian, but she has strong transsexual feelings. In her sexual relationships with women, she feels as if she were a man—and perhaps she will be one day, for she has recently begun to seriously explore her transsexuality.

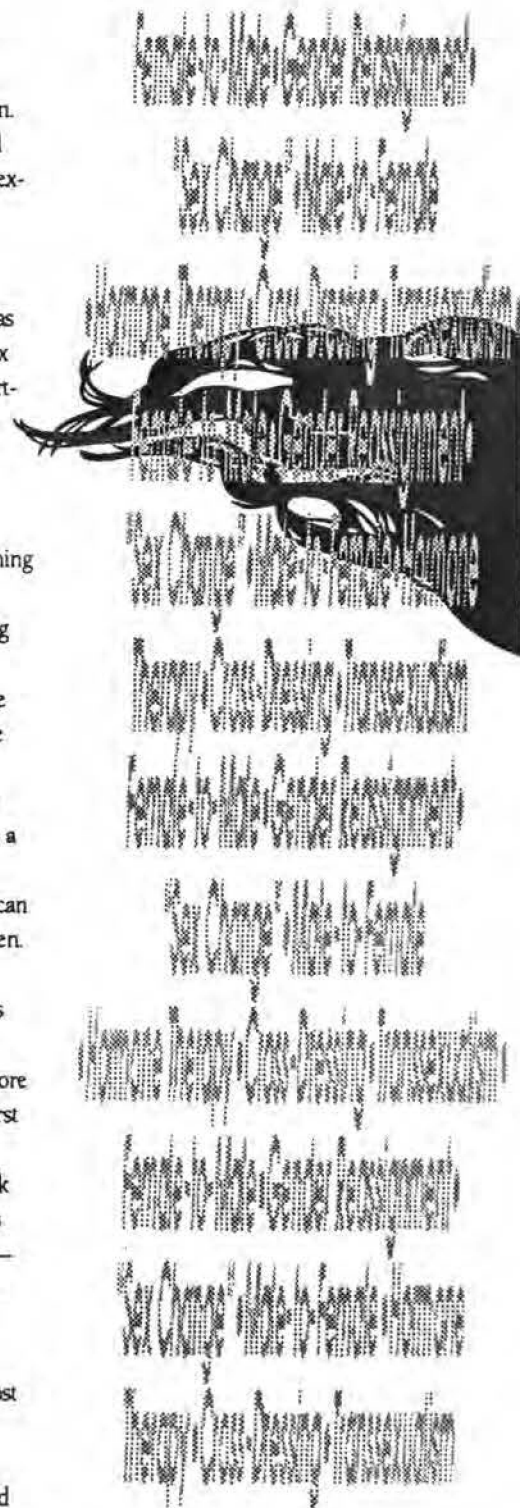
OK, now it's time for a quiz.

Nasty Nookie, the drag queen. Is she gay, or what?

Yes, she's gay. She had the chance to go to bed with a woman once, and the fact that she almost did still frightens her.

Andrea and Samantha, the two transsexual women? They're gay, right?

Right, but only because each is in love with another woman. If they preferred men, they would be straight. And it doesn't make any difference if they've had the "operation" or not. They are





women, and womanhood lies between the ears, and not between the legs. Their lovemaking, if they are pre-op (and I'm not saying), is an accommodation, the best they can do with anatomies they never wanted. And if they're post-op, their lovemaking is the same as that of any two women in love.

Is Brooke, the genetic girl with a thing for Sam, gay?

Yes, but if and when she starts living as a man, she won't be.

Are Sylvia and Bette gay?

No.

Then why are they wearing dresses? Gotcha!

Okay, chowderhead. Listen closely, 'cause this is the only time I'm gonna say this: one's sexual orientation has nothing whatsoever to do with one's gender.

Say what?

One can be a man or a woman, and one can prefer a man or a woman. The two aren't related. Apples and oranges. Gender is a sense of self. Sylvia and Bette aren't dressed up for any sexual reason, but because they like themselves that way. Sylvia would occasionally express herself as a woman even if she were the last person on Earth, and so would Bette. Andrea and Samantha have *become* women, just as Brooke would like to become a man, because that is the way they have always seen themselves. Only Nasty (who we now see going out the door with her fraternity boy in tow) dresses for sexual reasons.

Remember Sharon? She of the slipping silicone? Sharon is a special case. She's transgendered, but firmly imbedded in the gay community. She is always at the park on Pride Day, was bashed outside the Gallus and again at Ansley Mall, has a gay male lover, reads all the bar publications, and shops primarily at gay-owned businesses. But she's not gay. Like Andrea and Samantha, she's transsexual. Unlike them, she's stuck somewhere in between being a man and being a woman. Her wish to be a woman is as strong as theirs, but her game plan was flawed—not because of her immersion in *gay* life, but by falling into some of the traps associated with a flashy, superficial *gay* lifestyle—or any other type of flashy, superficial lifestyle, for that matter—alcohol, drugs, frequent and unprotected sex, and the silicone that is beginning to disfigure her.

Many people in the *gay* community consider Sharon and Nasty Nookie to be the same—*gay* men. After all, both appear in public as women sometimes, and as men sometimes; both appear on stage as female impersonators; both are silicone sisters; both have gay male lovers; both have drug and alcohol problems; both hook on the side; both can be found at the Gallus at two in the morning.

But there is a difference, and it's an important one. Nasty is a man, knows it, and is proud of it. Sharon, in her heart, at least, is a woman. She would get rid of any residual maleness if she could; she is just too undisciplined to bring it about.

Despite similarities in lifestyle and appearance, Nasty and Sharon are worlds apart, and warrant different treatment. Sharon, for example, refuses to use her male sexual apparatus in bed, or even to allow it to be touched. Nasty, as we've already mentioned, is a different story. Those who want a potent she-male are going to be disappointed with passive Sharon, and those who expect a submissive, docile partner are going to be surprised when they get Nasty home. Those who crave masculine companionship will not find it in Sharon, although Nasty can male-bond in spades.

Okay, now you're an expert. So the next time you see someone cross-dressed, you'll remember that you may be looking at a transgendered person instead of a drag queen. ▼

[For information about gender issues, please contact:

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