

SSMC Public Forum
Topic- Gender Identity
Location: Capitol Hill Library (425 Harvard Ave E)
Time: 6:00 PM – 7:45 PM
Date 9-13-06

**The first 45 minutes was taped for future airing on The Seattle Channel. From 6:45 - 7:45pm there was a community Q&A that was not taped (to protect participant's privacy).*

Facilitator, Marsha Botzer with The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force
(mbotzer@olypen.com).

Panelists:

- 1. Aidan Key - Producer / Director of FTM: A Gender Odyssey**
- 2. Aurea Astro - Economist/Presenter on Financing Gender Transitions**
- 3. Ingrid Swenson - Mental Health Therapist at Seattle Counseling Service**
- 4. Erik Swenson was unable to attend.**

Marsha began by introducing all the panelists. Was very complimentary to the Council for all of the efforts to do out reach in the community. Asks each panelist to make an opening remark.

Aurea - High school is an important place to begin education around gender identity.

Educate on the fluidity of gender identification. Very important to start there,

Aidan - I produce an annual conference that addresses this topic broadly. From my first conference in Calif, to now...it is a forever learning/evolving journey. I have an identical twin sister that has made my transition from female to male a point of media interest,

Ingrid – likes to be able to educate folks about the gender variables, and to be a community activist for those who don't have a voice. I.e. low income/disabled.

Marsha brought up her own experience, both as ex chair of SSMC, and current role She then moved the group to a discussion session.

Discussion Topics **Marsha asked the group to comment/discuss the following:**

Q1 What is the most pressing question/need/fear facing the transgendered community?

Aidan- Both letting people know as well about you as well as the actual transition. People risk their lives, loss of academic credentials, family support; children- custody issues...they face the concern of who will I be/become? What will the future hold for me? What will I be able to take forward? It is very overwhelming...

Ingrid –Individual counseling and group is available, but a barrier is in the whole binary system. And they don't have access to medical support to do the transition... To actually pay for them, the surgeries, the treatments. So funding is the largest/pressing issue.

Aurea – I was in Japan, and spent 6 months trying to determine how the transition could be done...from the mental therapy requirement to the actual surgery. Costs are exorbitant. I didn't want to stay in the gender "gray". Some Students were using student loans, putting off even buying a car. If you want it bad enough... You will try to figure it out. But the costs keep going up...there is no price barrier...meaning, no reason for prices to come down. We are being exploited because the need is absolute...T...or testosterone is available but expensive....

Aidan-Cost is a major topic at the conference. It isn't accessible to all. I.e. public assistance doesn't allow 35-40 dollars a month in drugs. The "gender gray" is real. Not everyone is interested in physical transition...total transition. But is OK with gender fluidity. But if the population at large doesn't know your gender.... it may pose a safety risk. More violence and sexual assault is more prevalent and pertinent to either fluidity or transitional status folks. I.e.... where passing isn't obvious yet.

Ingrid. Standards of care are issues...i.e. hours of counseling...depression and anxieties are prevalent as you are uncomfortable with the contrariness of the body and the mind. Can progress to much more severe mental disorders. Can be as simple as being afraid to use the bathroom that brings on bladder infections.

Q2. How should the City of Seattle respond and incorporate policy?

All - More training available as outreach, more education available.

Aidan drew a blank because it has taken so much effort so far...the dream situation seems out of reach.

Ingrid - If Seattle could have unisex bathrooms, that would be ideal.

Q3. What are the pressing legal issues?

Aurea – discrimination at work. It may be the law to not discriminate; but there is a sense that there will be a subtle repercussion. Are laws really enforceable anyway?

Ingrid – Standards of care... really aren't fluid enough, affordable enough, and now with the gender queer choices, they look at these hoops that are necessary to get hormones/therapy on this binary track, and don't see where they fit. The laws are not fluid enough...stays with those binary system. And legal allowance does not mean legal funding, so there is a clear issue of class around people seeking transitional opportunities.

Aidan – class, age and race does impact this. Every legal maneuver starts with Gender...which forms are you handed. Homeless shelters are an issue, and a lot of doors may be closed to you because you don't "fit"...college issues, draft issues, every turn is complicated. Who you can marry where is state by state. I.e....born, vs. drivers license. Texas, vs. Washington.

Q4. How can health and access to services be improved? How can Seattle help these issues?

Ingrid – how about a generic form for Sex where you fill in vs. check one of two boxes.

Aidan- any social service awareness training of any organization. Institutions, businesses that may allow them to implement some changes to make it better via a collaborative process. Health care services could be helped by an active advocacy program to support citizens who need support, physical support to visit a doctor. Or follow up on issues that occur. That would be powerful.

Aurea – How to find local therapists...is there a resource web page to help people goggle for help? There is a resource center now where these pamphlets are available. Insure all LGBT provide information about supportive services.

Ingrid – with HB 2661 , educate people on how to handle discrimination.... where can they go, what can they do? Make sure the Civil Rights Agency is well versed/trained to help when people call and need assistance.

Gender issues aren't a stand-alone focus on the city's web site.... seems to be a tag a long to G and L issues. Dedicate some space to Gender.

New issues arise around gender queer as well as Transgendered, which will call for more creative solutions/services.

Q5. Can you give a definition on The basics of Gender identity or primer and what the spectrum is?

Aidan – sexual orientation is a basis...but can be confused with gender. I.e. Lesbian is not the same as Transgendered. Does the person feel their body matches their desires/thoughts/feelings?

Ingrid- Society sees binary gender orientation. Ingrid sees a much broader spectrum. She/he identifies as both.

Aurea – never could understand why people think she is a girl. Identifies as bigendered...thinks it is fluid/continuum.

Marsha – this takes a lot of time/years to make sense for the individual dealing with transgendered feelings.

Q6. Can you touch on what kind of Discrimination any of you have experienced?

Ingrid – when people at the grocery store assume to say he or she...

Aurea – thinks she wasn't given a chance to get promoted because they thought she wasn't professional enough...is it how she looks? Too masculine?

Marsha – it is courageous for this panel to be sitting here willing to publicly talk about this.

Confusion in the work place, ostracized, family disengagement...

Ingrid – thinks people assume transgendered are mentally ill. Vs. mental health issues are a result of transphobic society...."gender identity disorder"...we need to de-stigmatize this. It is not a mental illness.

Aurea -There are a lot of myths/stereo types around transgendered... is Lesbians are butch. Trans men are butch/straight...but there is no one mold. It is a lot of work.

Aidan – Trans is highly sexualized...the first reaction is straight society wants to protect their children. Or they are hyper interested in the sexuality around this.... A person who was supposed to put up posters refused to put them up where “traditional families” would be exposed to them. Again, uneducated fears.

Q7. Marsha – Seattle does have a lot of resources Can you list some?

Seattle Counseling Service has a lot of programs to help this gender community. As for other direct services available? – Find them through networking. Ingersall is a direct service group. Weekly meetings every week.
Queer Beds on Capital. Drag shows at college, GLBT dances too.

Q8. Can someone discuss Inter- sex folk's... the definition, their issues etc.

Ingrid – medical field says ambiguous genitalia...or dual genitalia.... It is an unknown...most people wouldn't necessary know it. But the resources are still available and should allow people to identify the way they want to.
There is an Inter sex Group of North America as a resource.

Q&A from Audience

Q. How about getting a job, as going through the transition can be very evident, is it difficult?

Aidan -Few are in the jobs they were in pre transition.... Temporary employment is often used as a stepping-stone and generally below their skill/pay worth.

Q. Is there a divide between M to F and F to M community and why?

Aurea - more of a split between Gay men and Lesbians then in the trans community.

Aidan...does think there is a divide. Many factors...transition process is different. The social acceptance is more for a masculine female-bodied person vs. a feminine look/male bodied person. How society reacts/accepts each is different. There is also a generational issue...More Transmale newness vs. transwomen.... who have been visible longer.

Ingrid...yes there is a divide. She runs a group balanced between both.... both admit they really didn't know the “other side” until this group.

Q. To Ingrid...you address yourself as either male/female or neither. How did you get comfortable with that?

Ingrid. Lot's of therapy...supportive partner, friend's support, honest dialogue. Personal advice...Mix it up. Let people know what you prefer. Ingrid can take either/or. Look for reasonable response.

Q. Why do you think there are more gender queer folks than transgendered? First definition...

Aidan – gender queer means all encompassing blend of gender expression/fluidity, not tied to any one gender. Additionally, a trans identity but not wanting to pursue physical transition.

The audience member discussed it as Butch/fem day-to-day...meaning again fluid. Day to day, month to month. Vs, transgendered .

Is there more gender queer vs. Trans?

Today there is a lot more variability for difference...and more visible around gender queer. There is also an overlap in some individuals....

Aidan – Gender queer people who identify that way have helped to create elbowroom for all. There isn't just a narrow set of choices. Hopefully will help the Trans community by making it more understandable.

Q. Ingrid - when you go by either or pronoun.... you still say you get offended when people assume. I don't get it.

Ingrid...doesn't like people making the choice.... Ingrid wants to be the one to decide.

Q. Gender variant people need help, as do sys gendered (not trans)partners.... funding is still a huge/primary issue. Both organizational funding to support the community and individual abilities to fund are necessary. What can we do?

Aurea – the individual needs to do what they can, nickel and diming it.

Aidan – it does feel like people are on their own. Local events that help an individual...but no large/clear organizational support. Loans, donations, debt accumulation all are used to pay. Some can't get enough any way to fund the transitional process. Black market drugs, friendly drug stores etc...sometimes are the only alternative,

Ingrid - Can this SSMC advocate for funding from the city?

Marsha – even if clients can afford to transition. It sometimes costs them their current career.

Q. Comments by Phoenix...Gender queer identified. Heading toward trans identified.... The binary view in even in the trans community...there is a fluid more expansive culture...gender queer...all of us need to allow for variation and difference. Additionally, sometimes it isn't a financial issue, but an existing medical condition that prevents the ability to complete a transition.

Ingrid – agreed with both comments. Hard to feel part of the trans community if you don't make the decision to change pronouns, or want to complete a physical transitional process.

Aurea – look for alternative solutions...there are tradeoffs...sometimes...

Aidan – 8 years into the transition. This disconnect does exist...need to look for a common ground.... where can we come together...we do all need each other. Issues that prevent us from connecting come from insecurity sometimes.... There really isn't a cookie cutter approach to Trans process.

Q. Partner of a trans man. Together for 3 years. In mid 40's.... The F to M is a problem in the L community...and the partner's issues where they need more support. Can SSMC be more supportive to other organization i.e. Chamber of Commerce...had an issue with them closing on their house. It red flagged because of pre SS card...education is a real issue as it effects economic decisions...there are many older trans folk who are in the closet...while young people seem to be more out. Got loan, but interest rates raised.

Aurea – Trans or gender queer seem to be able to be classified as high risk because not the norm. Gender should not be a risk factor.

Aidan – age does bring other issues onto the plate. Conference has allowed that to come forth. Also, race and ethnicity is a major issue as well. I.e. G and L are major issues, and Trans is also very problematic...particularly in groups of color. African groups seem Less tolerant.

Ingrid – we can't make assumptions as to how people identify. Fear and discomfort play a large role. Stealth is a choice. Simply listen to people's stories...and don't assume, or draw your own conclusion... stay non judgmental.

Q. Public Health Dept. training was done to get them to change from pink/blue to neutral. These changes can happen. It was very successful.
Advocate for the speakers bureau so the funding doesn't cut....
Additionally, the panel is all white. You need to get more inclusive.... insure the whole group gets represented...
There are a few people who are always called on, and it is fatiguing. Need a wider group to call on, to share resources to get the message out.

Q. There is a greater leeway in Seattle on gender identity here than in other cities...even if there is more elbowroom. Why are more and more people pursuing surgery?

M. 2002 had x % of protections. 31% in 2006 have protections. There haven't been any frivolous lawsuits.

Marsha asked if, as a final thought, each of the panelists were to have a Blog or Book Theme, what would it be, relative to tonight's discussion:

Aidan – had a great deal of success simply talking, drawing parallels, talking about what scares us...respect and empathy has been a common result.... and ends successfully or "they don't get it for now".

Ingrid My experience is my experience only. It would be an autobiographical vs. it applies to anyone else.

Aurea – Living in a world of exuberance – Capital Hill is very exhilarating. Seattle support is so there...except at work...unfortunately can't feel that way all day long...at least for now. But I can do it.

Final Thoughts/summary conclusions –

Full House again. 25+ and 10 commissioners...

Facilitation by Marsha was great. There were no "dead" spaces. All panelists participated well. Audience was not shy with questions or comments.

Key take aways – SSMC needs to advocate for more funding, training, and dedicated advocacy for this group. This seems to be a group who feels left out, with little support, or attention. Lives on the margin. Money, services, information, and

an effort to be inclusive and educate agencies, departments on this subject. Create more acceptance and sensitivity around the many real obstacles this group shares.