

GIVEN AT MLGPA DINNER
FOR "GREAT PIONEER" AWARD

APRIL 8, 2000

BY JEAN VERMETTE

You know, whenever I get behind a microphone like this I'm always tempted to do my Elvis Presley impersonation. But I've only been given a few minutes to speak, so what I want to do is use my time to try to get as many of you as possible to change the way you think.

The Maine Gender Resource And Support Service has always given its educational workshops about the transgendered and intersexed communities to people of every sexual orientation and from all walks of life.

In case anyone is unfamiliar with the terminology, I'll tell you that being "intersexed" means being born with some combination of physical and anatomical characteristics of both sexes. That's a fairly straight-forward definition. Being "transgendered" is a little more complex.

Whenever I give a workshop, I always start with a fairly long explanation and discourse about gender and gender-identity so that everyone understands that our gender self-identity (in other words how we each view ourselves as masculine or feminine beings) is something completely separate from our physical sex. It's entirely possible for some female-bodied people to view themselves as more masculine than feminine and it's entirely possible for some male-bodied people to view themselves as more feminine than masculine. Being transgendered means having a gender self-identity which is different from what folks would expect you to have, given your sex.

Folks usually think that's pretty self-evident, so then I continue on to make sure that everyone understands that our gender self-identity is also something completely separate from our sexual orientation. Heterosexual people can be transgendered, gay people can be transgendered, lesbian people can be transgendered, and bisexual people can be transgendered. There may be a little discussion about that, but we're not talking about rocket science here, so eventually everyone is able to grasp and accept that concept as well.

Then I start to tighten the screws. I point to myself and say, "Look, Here's the deal. I was born with a male body. I didn't like it, and with the help of therapists and doctors and surgeons I was able to make extensive renovations; but I was born with a male body, and I have to own that fact. From my earliest sense of gender, my gender self-identity has always been that I'm feminine and a girl. And from the time my sexuality began to develop, I have always been sexually attracted only to women. So," I ask them, "how are you going to define me?"

About half of them (both male and female and of a variety of sexual orientations) usually say, "DUH! You're a heterosexual guy who thinks of himself as a woman." Then most of the other half (both male and female and of a variety of sexual orientations) will look at them and say, "Wait a minute. We think that she's a lesbian woman who was born with a birth defect." Then the remaining few folks will say, "No, no, she was a heterosexual guy who changed his sexual orientation and became a lesbian woman." Then I ask, "Wait a minute, how can you say I've changed my sexual orientation? I was sexually attracted to

women before these changes and I'm sexually attracted to women now. My orientation hasn't changed."

Usually there are a few moments of silence while folks chew on this information and try to figure out how to make it fit into what they've always believed, and then I start to see the light bulbs turn on, and they get these silly little grins on their faces, and what they're thinking is, "Gosh, maybe all this heterosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual stuff isn't as black and white as we thought. Maybe all these labels that we try to attach to people and all these boxes that we try to put people into are more a reflection of our religious and political thinking than they are a reflection of the reality. Maybe the reality is simply that we have one human being (who has a particular set of characteristics) who cares about and loves another human being (who has a particular set of characteristics)." And after that there are lots of questions and discussion and exploration and everyone has a wonderful time.

For years now the heterosexual community and the gay, lesbian, and bisexual communities have been at odds with each other over the "sexual orientation issue" because many have felt that sexual orientation differences are so great and so opposed as to be virtually irreconcilable. Few have perceived that there might be a naturally-occurring intermediate state that could be used to bridge those differences and allow everyone to join hands; and they have failed to recognize that that bridge already exists with the transgendered and intersexed communities.

The transgendered and intersexed communities have existed for at least as long as the heterosexual, gay, lesbian, and bisexual communities and we span all of them. We are your mothers and fathers, your brothers and sisters, your spouses and your partners. Many of us have had long years of internal struggle, not to decide whether we are male or female, heterosexual or gay or lesbian or bisexual, but rather to understand that we are all of those things, wrapped up in single person-hoods, and capable of living harmonious lives regardless of what our particular combination of characteristics happens to be. By our very existence, we stand as testimony to the fact that such seemingly diverse and polarized aspects of life as male and female, heterosexual and homosexual are, in reality, only two sides of the same incredibly thin coin.

But, as with any bridge, we cannot be of any help to you, and we cannot have any unifying capabilities, unless you choose to utilize us. I encourage all of you to accept us, and embrace us, and dance the life-dance with us. It is in your best interest to do so, because I think what you will find is that as the heterosexual community learns to accept and embrace its transgendered and intersexed members; and as the lesbian, gay, and bisexual communities learn to accept and embrace their transgendered and intersexed members, that the heterosexual community and the lesbian, gay, and bisexual communities will have learned to accept and embrace each other. And that, after all, is what the struggle is all about, isn't it?