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Past, Present, Future

From Nearly Nothing to a Strong Community with a Rich Future

by Gwendolyn Ann Smith

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Gwendolyn Ann Smith

It is often hard, as a transgender person, to feel that you are making progress. I have been an activist within the transgender community for well over a decade. To some, I am well beyond my "sell by" date, remaining in the fray while so many others have long since moved onto other interests.

It is always heartening to know that when one stands up for rights, they are not standing alone.

You may wonder what keeps me going. I simply have a passion to see this nascent community continue to grow in strength. To be honest, I think we can look back and see change within our history and easily compare it to where we may be going.

I'm not going too far back, into discussing Lord Combury, Pope Joan, Contessa d'Eon, Jean d'Arc, or other potential transgender folks through history. This

column is only so long, and Leslie Feinberg already wrote a perfectly suitable book covering centuries of history. No, I'm only going back to the last century, and considering where things were in the post-World War II world.

This was a time when the transgender community - if I could even refer to it as such - was indistinguishable from the rest of the queer community. If we go back far enough, there really wasn't a distinction between the various portions of the community, if only because we were all small and hidden: Everyone needed as many allies as we could. In the years immediately following Stonewall - an event that included the transgendered alongside with the rest of the larger community - transpeople made great strides, turning away a number of anti-cross-dressing laws while also winning the right to change gender markers on identity paperwork and even the right to marry. At least in a sizable number of [American] states.

This was not to remain: By the mid 1970s, transgender people were being removed from pride parades, transwomen were being routinely shut out of lesbian spaces, and by the latter parts of the decade society overall was increasing in intolerance towards all parts of the L.G.B.T. community. It would be another decade before transgender people would again - rather grudgingly, at times - be welcomed back into the greater community.

Today, there remain some places where transgender is still viewed with suspicion within the larger community, with the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival still clinging to outdated policies, and transgender people still facing an uphill battle towards acceptance in some community spaces. Even with this, transgender people are largely included within each of the major queer organisations (barring some remaining issues with H.R.C.), and most local groups include "transgender" in their mission statements and the like.

The same is true in the world at large. With the current strength of the conservative right, and sometimes lukewarm acceptance from our allies, some have been loath to push for transgender rights. Likewise, D.O.M.A. laws have undermined transgender marriage rights, and the current [George W. Bush, Republican Party] administration has paved the way for the loss of identity paperwork alterations.

Nevertheless, the community continues to win victories, largely with local and state gains with anti-discrimination and hate crime laws. For the first time, a pending Federal hate crime bill, in the House of Representatives, includes transgender people.

Perhaps more important, the transgender community is gaining increased visibility, and is getting more chances to educate others. Transgender-themed news stories are carried in the major media on a regular basis, and much of this media is positive.

One of the other benefits of today is a sizable - and growing - number of highly competent individuals and organisations focusing on the rights of transgender people. It is always heartening to know that when one stands up for rights, they are not standing alone.

All of this makes me rather confident about our future. In spite of the obstacles we still face, I can now foresee things that would have been mere pipe dreams a decade ago.

It is likely that by the next decade, issues of transgender inclusion within the larger community will at last be an issue of the past. If anything, much of the heavy lifting is complete, with the majority of people understanding why transgender people are in the community

and most showing a willingness to work together.

I also feel it will be only a matter of time that we will see transgender-inclusive hate crime and anti-discrimination laws in a majority of states. It may still be some time before we see such on a federal level, but we may see such eventually achieved, or made largely moot given wins at the state level. While we still face a seemingly uphill battle over rights that had previously been secured, I strongly suspect that we can secure these, particularly once we see a change in the administration. One cannot move the unmovable, yet the fight for civil rights will not, cannot cease.

Meanwhile, I see transgender organisations growing, becoming vibrant, strong forces for continued community growth. Meanwhile, we already have a number of new transgender activists coming up through the ranks, many of whom will grow into some of our strongest leaders to date.

I do not know if we shall see society fully embrace transgender people in my lifetime, but I could see a time when the transgender are viewed as simply another part of human diversity, rather than some rag-tag group out on the fringes, deserving of both scorn and pity versus true acceptance.

I've seen this community go from nearly nothing, when I first started to look for others like me at the start of the 1990s, to the strong community that has a rich future ahead. It is this future that gives me the strength to continue to be involved. Indeed, it is our past, present, and future that makes me nothing but proud to be transgender.

Gwendolyn Ann Smith

From Gwendolyn's website: Gwendolyn Ann Smith is a graphic designer, desktop publisher, web designer, writer, and transgender activist.

She writes transmissions for four major L.G.B.T. newspapers in the United States, *Baltimore Gay Life*, the *Bay Area Reporter*, *Between The Lines*, and the *Philadelphia Gay News*. Individual Transmission pieces are also often printed in *Express Gay News*, the *Houston Voice*, the *New York Blade*, the *Southern Voice*, and the *Washington Blade*. In addition to these, she has contributed to several other publications and online forums over the years. Her website contains a vast number of her writings that are of interest to transgender people and our allies.

Gwen has spoken publicly since High School, and has presented on transgender-related topics since 1994. She has spoken in a number of different clubs and forms.

Gwendolyn Ann Smith also founded the Transgender Day of Remembrance in 1998, a day which occurs annually on 20th November. It is a day to memorialize those who have been killed as a result of transphobia, or the hatred or fear of transgender and gender non-conforming people, and acts to bring attention to the continued violence endured by the transgender community. The Transgender Day of Remembrance was originally organised to memorialize the murder of Rita Hester in Allston, Massachusetts, however since its inception, it has slowly evolved from the web-based project started by Smith into an international day of action. In 2010, Transgender Day of Remembrance was observed in over 185 cities in more than twenty countries.



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The Gender Centre is committed to developing and providing services and activities, which enhance the ability of people with gender issues to make informed choices. We offer a wide range of services to people with gender issues, their partners, family members and friends in New South Wales. We are an accommodation service and also act as an education, support, training and referral resource centre to other organisations and service providers. The Gender Centre is committed to educating the public and service providers about the needs of people with gender issues. We specifically aim to provide a high quality service, which acknowledges human rights and ensures respect and confidentiality.