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So, What is Seahorse

Cross-Dressing with Dignity

by April

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Seahorse is known formally as 'The Seahorse Society of New South Wales Incorporated'. It is a non profit self-help group funded solely by our members' contributions, internal fund raising, attendance fees and the odd donation.

We provide a valuable service to cross-dressers, their families and friends. Our current 'rules' define a cross-dresser in broad outline simply "as one who dresses and behaves as a member of the opposite sex" and this was done on purpose.

Historically, the ideas and actions of our founders restricted membership. Some ten years ago, these rules were changed but the legacy of those early days caused our image to seem narrow and restrictive. Nowadays, anyone who feels they fit this broad definition is welcome, as are their family and friends.

Seahorse has been in operation since the early 1970s and always seems to have had a membership of around eighty people. Twenty or thirty joining each year and around the same number dropping out. I think this statistic more or less defines the niche role that Seahorse plays.

We reach out to the solitary cross-dresser who is stuck in a closet with no likelihood of ever getting out and we offer them a bigger closet. We gently entice them out of their homes and their secrecy and show them that there is a world outside.

Starting with a safe venue where they can meet with other cross-dressers, we prove that they are no longer all alone, that they are not perverted and that they have no reason to be ashamed. Then we show them the outside world with outings to sympathetic restaurants or dances, take them shopping and encourage them to go further a field. We introduce them to other more adventurous groups and, as their self-confidence increases, we finally teach them that they don't need us.

Everyone has their own balance between masculinity and femininity. Some members move off to those other groups and they go with our blessing. We are happy to have been an agent in bringing them together. Some are happy to remain with Seahorse, perhaps helping still more people out of their closets as they were helped previously. Others are happy just to belong. They have found the world and they do not need it: Still others will leave us and return to their original closet. It is their decision and they can decide from knowledge rather than ignorance.

Most of our advertising is done by word of mouth, which includes organisations like Lifeline and The Gender Centre or through feature articles in magazines and the local press. There is always a burst of interest when Seahorse gets a mention in an 'agony column', and once they know the name, they can find us in the phone book. Our recently completed pamphlet has been sent to most community organisations and is beginning to generate some responses. Work has now started on a second pamphlet directed towards shopkeepers, explaining how to deal with cross-dressers without embarrassment and to the maximum profit of both parties.

We encourage people to contact us by way of our Information Line which is presently manned on Thursday evenings with our answering machine connected at other times. This link is intended to provide help and advice on any topics related to cross-dressing, from 'where to buy clothes' to coping with the issues that arise. It's basically peer support and, as we always point out, is non-expert counselling. We frequently suggest other avenues of contact for professional help, generally through The Gender Centre.

The Information Line is staffed by our committee on a roster basis. We have a number of partners and family who are willing to chat to others in similar circumstances. We prefer to arrange for the partner to ring the person concerned rather than to divulge home phone numbers but, with permission, this is sometimes done once the bona fides of callers has been established.

At present, nearly ten percent of our membership consists of partners or family members and we actually experience a low enquiry rate. Despite this, those who do contact us have provided very positive feedback, frequently urging their partners to join and get involved. Our third pamphlet project will be aimed towards telling partners how Seahorse can help.

At present, we only have one female cross-dresser. We'd love to have more. If you're out there, give us a call.

Our motto is 'Cross-Dressing with Dignity'. We strive to achieve this and we are non-discriminatory. Currently our membership has just passed 130, so we must be doing something right!

under the S.A.A.P. program and supported by the N.S.W. Health Department through the AIDS and Infectious Diseases Branch. Polare provides a forum for discussion and debate on gender issues. Unsolicited contributions are welcome, the editor reserves the right to edit such contributions without notification. Any submission which appears in Polare may be published on our internet site. Opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect those of the Editor, The Gender Centre Inc., the Department of Family & Community Services or the N.S.W. Department of Health.

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.