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# What is Seahorse

## The Seahorse Society of New South Wales

by Rhonda, Member of Seahorse since 1992 and current Seahorse Magazine Editor  
Article appeared in Polare magazine: April 2009 Last Update: October 2013 Last Reviewed: September 2015

On the pages of *Polare* there is always an advert for The Seahorse Society of New South Wales. Some of you may not know what Seahorse does or why it exists, others of you may at some time have been a member and moved on along the journey towards the gender that you feel is right for you. With this article I hope to explain why we exist and what we are doing nowadays.

I would like to thank Rosemary for her help in putting this brief history together, especially for her information about the early years. At our Annual Ball at the Mercure Hotel earlier this year Rosemary was recognised as the Founder of Seahorse New South Wales and declared a Life Member of the Society.



**S**eahorse came into existence thirty-seven years ago when a cross-dresser, Rosemary, frustrated at the non-existence of any meeting place for people like herself decided to seek out other cross-dressers in Sydney and try to get away from the loneliness which she felt. Rosemary had lived much of her life overseas and had come in contact with groups during her travels and knew that in a city the size of Sydney there were bound to be like-minded people.

***... a chance to make new friends with similar interests and lessen the loneliness that can lead to a depressive state.***

She placed an advert in what in those days was a very risqué newspaper *The Kings Cross Whisper*, a journal that was circulated in Kings Cross and similar

areas throughout Australia. Because Australian society was very repressive the advertisement had to be discreet and yet convey its message. It asked for anyone interested in 'T.V.' to contact a box number. There was an enormous response from all over Australia, even though some believed that 'TV' meant what they watched in the evening at home. Fortunately the message was understood by sufficient people and an initial meeting was arranged at a restaurant.

At that meeting it was agreed that they would form a club with a constitution and Rosemary was elected as first President. It was also decided that at first they would have meetings in private homes. Secrecy was paramount as exposure of such a group would have been a disaster. Meeting in private homes worked for a while and the group grew.

After a couple of years Rosemary was posted overseas so she handed over the club to a full committee. As with any group there is a movement of members, some losing interest, others relocating overseas or interstate and others finding that the club just wasn't for them.

In those days a 'walk on the wild side' might be a group of suburban 'mums' at the school P. & C. to go into the Cross in a coach and see '*Les Girls*' and talk about it to the other mums at the tuck shop for weeks.

Not long after the club was formed, the Secretary, who was the only one who had access to the names and addresses of members and accrued funds disappeared. Only through what is now called 'networking' did the club survive. During the 1980s and early '90s a number of venues were tried as meeting places. It was difficult to find a safe, convenient place to meet. The Gender Centre was very helpful to the group making available a small room in which to store records and a basic photo copier and a useful place to conduct membership interviews.

Society was still not very accepting of cross-dressing and one of the main fears at the time was that a journalist would gain membership and expose the group to public ridicule. There was one female journalist who did approach the President and was invited to a meeting and a social gathering at a Glebe coffee shop.

What appeared in the women's magazine later was not very complimentary of the members or the organisation. This discouraged any further dalliance with the general media until the late 1990s. By then, attitudes had changed slightly. The Gay Mardi Gras had become a major event on the Sydney calendar and the Oxford Street area became a tourist attraction. Seahorse membership grew but never more than 100 members of whom only about 30 percent would attend meetings. It was at one of those meetings that the media was

again invited to come and have a look at us.

This time the request came from television, and involved a cameraman, sound recordist and Sue Smith, an interviewer from the Channel Nine *Breakfast Show*. What went to air was a very fair segment of about twelve minutes showing members enjoying the meeting and on camera interviews asking the usual questions. It started with one member being shown doing his day job and following him through the make-up stage and attending a meeting in his other guise.

Now after thirty-seven years, Seahorse is still there, and while now it is more public it still retains the secrecy and discretion that the majority of members want. There have been seven very successful balls held at major Sydney hotels. These are held annually in the July/August ball season and have attracted guests from all over N.S.W. and interstate. They have proved very popular with an average attendance of 140 guests.

Recently the President, Julia, after receiving a number of enquiries from country applicants initiated a series of seminars to be held in regional centres. These were considered necessary when country applicants found that on approaching health care workers in these districts they were unable to get the help they sought as the health workers had no knowledge or only outdated knowledge of cross-dressing. These seminars have proved a success and others are planned. Seahorse is not funded by any government body and these gatherings are financed by the members concerned.

The incidence of depression in the cross-dressing community has often been noted and the underlying cause is that when seeking help the ignorance of the health worker exacerbates the condition. Seahorse feels that by talking to these workers it will help them, if they have a client who is feeling frustrated in a small community by the need to dress in the other gender.

Of course the partners of cross-dressers also have problems. Finding out, in some cases after years of marriage, that their partner has been hiding a secret can be devastating to a relationship. In some cases this can be the last reason they need to lead to the divorce court and family break-up.

With this in mind Seahorse has a mobile phone number which is only to be used by partners of cross dressers where they are able to talk to another person who has experienced the same problems as themselves. These people are not professional counsellors but can talk from personal experience and this often helps.

You can see that the Seahorse Society is not just a venue for Sydney cross-dressers to get dressed up one night a month and meet other cross-dressers. In providing this meeting place it gives them the chance to make new friends with similar interests and lessen the loneliness that can lead to a depressive state.

For those unable or not willing to attend meetings we produce a magazine which covers what is happening in the group and members opinions on related subjects. The advent of the Internet has presented many with a link to others. It also makes it easier to find out about Seahorse. We have a regularly updated website which shows some of the aspects of Seahorse and explains what we are about. Many of the new applicants to join now find Seahorse from the Internet where previously they had to rely on seeing an infrequent article in a women's magazine.

Seahorse has changed quite a lot over the years; we still have the introductory interview and still retain the confidentiality that is important to members. We have been criticised by some for not changing enough to keep up with the times. The response to this is that we still provide a safe, friendly entry point into the confusing and challenging life for those who cross-dress. We don't try and influence anyone about which path they should take. Some of our members find they want to go further in their life experience of dressing while others find family, financial or work commitments prevent them doing moving further in gender variation. The professional Counsellor at the Gender Centre in Petersham, who often refers clients to Seahorse, is always available to help.

Where next for Seahorse? To continue to grow and provide a service at that entry point and to get the message out to the general community that we are not strange ... different, yes, but that isn't a crime!

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Polare Magazine is published quarterly in Australia by The Gender Centre Inc., which is funded by the Department of Family & Community Services 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.

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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.