

**BiTransAction – 1996 National Gay and Lesbian Task Force
Creating Change Conference
Alexandria, VA**

When Kerry Lobel called me at home a week before the 1996 Creating Change (CC) Conference I didn't think twice. Even though I'd only talked with her a couple of times during the previous year's Conference, we chatted like old friends. When I congratulated her on her new position as Executive Director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF), she thanked me and segued into congratulating me. The Task Force would be honoring me for my longtime service to the bisexual, transgender, lesbian, and gay communities at their upcoming Creating Change Conference in Alexandria VA. Needless to say I was deeply moved, and thanked her. I said that, in between "you're kidding me!" and "oh wow!" This was a big deal, not only for me but also for bisexual community visibility and the movement, since no bisexual leader had been recognized this way before.

As I hung up the phone I thought, "Well I guess I'm no longer the lesbian who fell from grace!" In the next moment, the image of Sally Field clutching her Oscar flashed across my mind, "You like me, you really like me!" I blushed and laughed out loud. Unlike my celebratory and life-affirming lesbian coming out process in 1976, my second coming out in 1980 was not an "endless" woman-identified-woman-loving-woman "waterfall." Coming out bisexual was devastating. The loss of lesbian friends and my activist community cut deep. The ostracism betrayed my sense of feminism. Kerry's news that I was to be honored tapped feelings I'd not dealt with since getting kicked out. So there I stood red-faced having my "Sally Field" moment, laughing and crying and feeling an incredible bittersweet sense of coming home. I flashed on the Dallas CC plenary when Phyllis Frye, the first transgender activist to be honored accepted her plaque to a full house stomping, standing ovation in 1994. Wow is all I could say; wow, I need to work on my acceptance speech!

I've been hooked since my first Creating Change in Los Angeles four years earlier in 1992. I realized then that the conference itself is an organizing tool which could be utilized to bolster our visibility, build movement capacity and educate on a national level. There is also nothing like being in the company of 1,500+ activists and organizers from around the country. CC is electric -- prime time networking, skills building and some of the best flirting you'll find anywhere.

This conference is a mixed bag. People come with different levels of experience, understanding, and exposure to our various issues. Even in the company of some of the most progressive people, many show their ignorance. Some even openly disdain those of us on the margins of an already marginalized population. To put it mildly, major misunderstandings prompt educational moments, and turf and scarcity issues can flare up. 1996, the year NGLTF honored me, was no different.

Thursday's CC pre-conference People of Color (POC) Organizing Institute was coordinated by the same New York City folks as the previous year in Detroit. The lead facilitator, K, was a well known and well practiced biphobe. I and others who had approached him previously would get the requisite apologetic remarks: "Thanks for bringing it up," and he'd "be more careful next time." Unfortunately it didn't matter how many times he was respectfully challenged and thoughtfully educated about bisexual people, our stereotypes and issues. He held firm to his prejudiced views. However, I approach situations like this one cautiously, hoping for the best, since I trust people can and do change.

The afternoon discussion was focused on health and HIV/AIDS. At one point, a woman out of my sightline in the back of the room introduced herself from The Gay and Lesbian Center in LA and declared, "The problem is bisexual men; they are spreading AIDS to unsuspecting women. This gives us all a bad name." As in year's past, K immediately looked in my direction. He would do nothing to interrupt the scapegoating even in a room that held many bisexual youth and men. My hand shot up. He called on me, and I stated firmly, "An identity does NOT spread HIV, only risky behavior does. A bisexual identity CANNOT spread HIV." A loud strong voice, also out of my sight and from the other side of the room, shot back, "She's wrong. I work at the LA Center too. Bisexual men DO spread HIV. I see it all the time." A split second later K's eyes shifted to me, then darted to the back of the room and back again to me. In that second I noticed the bisexual youth were leaning in on me, almost snuggled to each other and my legs and chair. This was not a safe space. The facilitators did not have our backs. I was trembling. K quickly segued to the next agenda item and posed a new question for discussion. I decided this was the last time this was going to happen at CC.

Later that afternoon, a group of bisexual and transgender leaders had agreed to gather in my hotel room. We were going to plan the evening's agenda for our historic meeting with Richard Socarides, the gay liaison to the Clinton White House. Transgender leader Yosenio Lewis had lobbied tirelessly to get this appointment for us. As my hotel room filled with people, we heard news of the day's educational picket line at the national headquarters of the American Psychiatric Association (APA). Eight national TBLG* organizations focused this groundbreaking protest on the use of Gender Identity Disorder (GID) to pathologize transgender people and gender-variant youth as "mentally ill." Even in a torrential downpour the picket garnered coverage in newspapers and on television. The room was buzzing with excitement.

After our Socarides agenda discussion, we agreed to include discrimination, violence, and the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA) as key talking points. Representing us at the Socarides meeting that evening were Yosenio, Shadow Morton, James Green, Marcus de Maria Arana of FTM* International, Stephanie Berger and Alexei Guren from BiNetUSA and Dominique RosaNegra Leslie MTF* transgender HIV/AIDS educator.

This gathering also gave us an opportunity to discuss the shockingly ignorant and hurtful remarks about transgender and bisexual folks that were being made by some of the attendees, the workshop leaders and pre-conference institute facilitators.

As I said this conference is a mixed bag. After listening to everyone check-in, I told my own horror story about the POC Institute. I suggested that we organize a speak-out at the plenary just before the main keynote address on Saturday. We would have a large captive audience and their focused attention. The 1993 LGBTQ Youth Speak Out at the Durham, NC CC had an incredible impact on those assembled and on future conferences. Timing for this action felt right.

I volunteered to ask Kerry for stage time to make a public statement and we (Marcella Bucknam, Nebraska Regional Organizer of BiNetUSA; Yosenio, Shadow, James and Marcus -- the bisexual, and heterosexual men of FTM International; Kris Roehling, Stephanie and Alexei , National Co-coordinators of BiNetUSA; Loraine Hutchins (and me) of BiNetUSA Advisory Board; Dominique; Shannon Minter, bisexual FTM from the National Center for Lesbian Rights; Gerard Palmieri of BiNetUSA; Mark Silver, editor *Anything That Moves* magazine; HIV/AIDS educator and theater director Cianna Stewart) brainstormed the over-all tone of the statement, and the points we wanted to make. James and Shadow took notes on our stories and ideas, and left to write the first draft.

I found Kerry and told her about my experience at the POC Institute. She grimaced that this sort of ignorance and scapegoating was still happening. I relayed what other bi and transgender folks reported at our meeting. I told her we wanted stage time for a speak-out during Saturday's main plenary. Without hesitation she agreed, "But no more than five minutes, eight max." On the way back to my room I saw Cheryl Chase, and invited her to check the way intersexed folks had been included in our statement.

When we reconvened Friday evening, I dispelled any assumption that I was going to be a visible lead during the plenary action. I'd had plenty of exposure and would be honored at Sunday's plenary. I encouraged others to come forward. Dominique and Gerard volunteered to read. Cianna suggested Jennifer Haejin Kim, a youth activist from Atlanta, also speak. With minor suggestions to the script Cianna took on the task of giving the statement a final tweak with her professional eye for a dramatic presentation in three parts.

On Saturday, out-going Executive Director Melinda Paras invited representatives from the bisexual and transgender communities to the stage to speak out in the spirit of Creating Change.

Dominique: *The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force has proactively and powerfully emphasized that the issues of the bisexual and transgender communities are the issues of the gay and lesbian communities. We would like to acknowledge the NGLTF staff for their inclusionary efforts. And we would like to let you see who we are. Would all the bisexual, transgender and intersexed people in the room please come forward so that we can all see you?*

Those of us who'd planned the action got up and walked forward and turned to face the audience. Then, like a tsunami, wave upon wave of bisexual, transgender and intersexed people came forward. The steady flow of people inspired and gave courage to others, who

then stood up and joined the rising tide. Numbers beyond our wildest dreams! A clear third of the people in the room had come forward and were standing in the front facing the audience who by then were giving us a standing ovation...

Dominique: *In spite of NGLTF's efforts, we have been marginalized, scapegoated, and felt prejudice against us during this conference. During many of the workshop sessions and institutes, bisexual, transgender, and intersexed people have been silenced or ignored. This weekend, by other activists, bisexual men have been accused of spreading AIDS. This weekend, by other activists, transsexual people have been accused of being heterosexual assimilationists. This weekend, by other activists, bisexual women have been asked to identify themselves as lesbians or not include themselves in the group. Our queer identities have been denied, overlooked, and dismissed.*

Gerard: *In one session, a bisexually-identified transsexual man asked why the presenter did not include bisexual and transgender people in his presentation. Rather than respond, the presenter thanked the transman for his question, then turned away and said, "But I just noticed some of my friends have arrived, and I think it is important for me to say hello to them." When he was challenged further, the presenter said that it was "not his issue".*

Dominique: *During a workshop on custody issues, a bisexual woman identified her self and her custody issues during the introductions, and was told that the session would not address the custody issues of bisexual or transgender people. She felt that she was being asked to leave, so she did.*

Jen: *During the youth sessions, I identified myself as a Korean-American bi-dyke queer, and was told that the people of color institute had happened the day before, and we were to leave those issues at the door. When I attended the queer youth of color institute, the facilitators included only lesbian and gay when they were speaking. I felt as if I had been denied the right to be present.*

Gerard: *In another workshop, a transsexual man of color was attempting to illustrate his experience of racism by tying it to his gender issues. He was cut off in mid-sentence and told that by bringing up gender, he was diverting the discussion away from racism.*

Dominique: *The NGLTF has been incredibly supportive throughout this conference, and were generous in giving us this time to speak out. Those of you who have supported us in the past, those of you who have spoken up for us when we were not present or were unable to speak for ourselves, and those of you who have said the words "bisexual and transgender" during this conference, we now invite you to stand up and be visible to us, as we have been visible to you.*

Gerard: *We would like all of you who are still seated to consider this challenge: The people standing around you have had the courage to acknowledge our presence in our queer community. They have come to understand that we have been named by our common enemies. We ask all of you who are seated to remember to say the words "transgender and bisexual," to learn to understand our issues as your own, to speak out for us as we have all spoken out for you. Please show your solidarity with bisexual, transgender, and intersexed people who are fighting for the rights of all queer people, and stand with us now.*

A few people remained glued to their seats, but for anyone in that room, especially those of us who were standing, our lives and our sense of community was forever transformed. The challenges and opportunities of the annual Creating Change Conference facilitates the “move” in this movement of ours. The meeting with Socarides was considered a success, and as far as the awards ceremony at the Sunday plenary -- what can I say, the conference wasn't over till the bisexual got her award.
Lani Ka'ahumanu, 1996

**TBLG/transgender, bisexual, lesbian, gay *FTM/female to male, MTF/male to female*

p.s. stay tuned for more details when the memoir comes out!