

Changing Hearts and Minds: The 2008 IFGE Conference

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Article

I've just returned from the International Foundation for Gender Education's annual conference that was held at the Doubletree Hotel in Tucson, Arizona. A speaker on the very first day said "If you let it, this conference will change you." Even though this was my first conference, the skeptic in me heard a sales pitch being thrown. "Maybe some other people buy that stuff, but not me", I told myself.

Most of the conference is spent in workshops (the full list [here](#)), but there were also three luncheons, three outings, and the Gala Banquet.

Three workshops really impacted me. The first workshop I attended was Pauline Park's "Making Diversity Real: Transgendered People of Color & the Transgender Movement". I didn't talk too much in this workshop, because I'm white, and I was there to listen and learn. As someone that focuses on diversity in a group setting, the workshop gave me some insight on how to make that happen without being condescending or engaging in tokenism.

The second workshop of note was Mariette Pathy Allen's workshop entitled "The Gender Frontier: From Mainland USA to Hawaii, Thailand, and New Zealand". Allen has been a professional photographer, writer and speaker on, and on behalf of, the TG community since 1978. Her workshop consisted of slides of her work over the years, along with a rolling commentary. It was really meaningful to me to see into a portal of the past, to those that have come before me. And as the slides and stories flew by, I was so engrossed, that I was jolted when one of those faces on the screen turned out to be someone I knew. After the workshop, I approached Allen and told her my story. She has such an engaging and personal spirit. She took me by the hand and said that she she had noticed me nodding in agreement with much of what she was saying. I was stunned by her powers of observation (especially in a low light environment). On reflection, I'm sure that her personal engagement and keen powers of observation are what make her such a powerful photographer.

I found Sam Allen's "No Skirt, No Heels, No Service?: Addressing FTM Participation & Inclusion In The Transgender Movement" to be one of the most educational workshops I've ever attended, transgender related or not. IFGE's workshop guide described it as:

"A candid discussion of topics including but not limited to FTM invisibility, where does 'passing' figure into the imbalance, gender roles & power dynamics, early socialization, barriers to transmen participation, and the responsibility of FTM transmen to 'step up and stand up'. Open to everyone. Bring your truth serum and a sense of humor. "

Allen's explanation of how socialization and language affects perception of others, was especially helpful for me (I had never been able to understand why I had been perceived as gay growing up, even though I was never feminine). I was impressed with how well Allen explained the dynamics without ever engaging in blaming or shaming others. Because my best friend is F2M, I thought that I'd be free from any of the behaviors or thoughts that cause F2M identified people to feel marginalized and silenced. Allen's nonthreatening way of communication allowed me to be able to examine my own thoughts and actions to see that I had engaged in some of the same kind of thinking and behavior.

Many new friendships were forged at the luncheon tables, but it wasn't just a time for socializing. The Diversity luncheon speakers included Amanda Simpson, Donna Rose, and Denise Leclair. Overall, the luncheons were an inspiring and unifying. The noted exception to this rule was Cheryl Ann Costa's acceptance speech at the Trinity Awards luncheon. Costa left more than one mouth agape, with her suggestions that F2M's go forth and "join the Rotary" or that transwomen should break from crossdressers and have their own conference. I started my transgender journey in November of 2000, but my time on the national advocacy scene has been limited. Going into the luncheon I had no idea who Costa was. I've learned since how much Costa has given to the community. I was told that this was her "retirement speech" from the community, and she saw the Trinity Award as her "gold watch." It's unfortunate for her that many people who attended (150 people at the conference were first time attendees) who might not know what Costa has done, will be left with the lasting impression of her as a negative train wreck.

While there were many distinctions in the population of the conference, I found that those distinctions were individual in nature. I had one crossdresser tell me that even though I was "a bit overweight" that she'd still "do" me. She also told me that women have more power than men. If I took her words as representative of the entire crossdressing community, even I would want some separation between the crossdressing and transsexual communities. Fortunately, I also came into contact with wonderful crossdressers like Lena Dahlstrom. Lena was in many of my workshops. She was one of the few people (besides myself) in Sam Allen's workshop that wasn't F2M identified. The chasm between these two people really delineated the weakness in Costa's call for spitting off the community. You've probably heard it said that our strength is in our diversity, but I'd contend that our weaknesses of binary thinking, bigotry, and misogyny, are spread out among the different sections of the transgender community too.

I made personal connections at the conference that have and will continue to change my life. I've always enjoyed reading Joelle Ruby Ryan, but meeting her in person really heightened that appreciation. She's not only someone that I respect, but someone that I'd like to get to know more as a friend. The names that I've seen and heard for years became much more meaningful and dynamic. And I'd be remiss if I didn't talk about finally meeting Monica Helms and my stunning come from behind arm wrestling victory.

As much as I loathe to admit it, I was wrong. I let the conference in, and I was changed. I've returned to Indiana with a renewed spirit, with new friendships, and a renewed outlook on my activism and my life. Next year, look for me at the 2009 IFGE conference. I'll be the one saying "this conference will change your life, if you let it."

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