

Trans rights come of age

By Christopher Daley

I would hazard a guess that few people in California realized that when they wound down their celebrations of the arrival of 2006, they were celebrating in the most transgender friendly state in the country. That lack of realization isn't surprising. While the changes that have been made on the state and local level in the last 15 years are profound and far-reaching, they have happened largely outside of the spotlight.

That's not to imply that transgender activism began only 15 years ago. Transgender people throughout the state have been standing up for their rights for at least several decades. This year we celebrate the 40th Anniversary of the very political Compton's Cafeteria Riots. A little more than a decade after the riots, activists in Los Angeles got the state's first anti-discrimination law passed on a local level. But it was right around 15 years ago that local activists in Santa Cruz got the state's second civil rights law passed and two years after that when San Francisco passed the third. Since then, at least five more local jurisdictions have followed suit. More far reaching, though, have been the changes on the state level.

Beginning with a law in 1999 designating crimes motivated by gender-identity-bias as hate crimes, California public policy has advanced quickly and solidly towards fully recognizing and supporting transgender people as equal participants in civil society. State law now clearly protects transgender people from discrimination in public education (2000), housing, employment, and the foster care system (2004), and public accommodation and insurance (2006).

Of course, the passage of each of these laws was the culmination of years of individual and organized efforts for dignity and justice. Each time a transgender employee in Fresno, parent in Orange County, student in San Jose, health care patient in San Diego, attorney in San Luis Obispo, asylum applicant in Los Angeles, tenant in Oakland, and City/County Commissioner in San Francisco stood up for themselves, their families, and their friends they set the stage for the profound social change that California is experiencing.

But passing these laws does not end the conversation. They are the manifestation of a public potential for full inclusion of transgender people and their families. That potential will only be realized through the continued efforts of activists, artists, writers, policy wonks, insiders, outsiders, and "civilians" to move an agenda that is broad-based, inclusive, strategic, and self-reflective.

While transgender people have been and will continue to be in the "driver's seat" of this movement, those of us who aren't transgender have our role to play. After all, these laws passed through a state legislature that doesn't contain a single "out" transgender elected official. And each time a parent welcomes the person they thought was their daughter home as their son, a co-worker supports the creation of a non-discriminatory work

environment, a teacher questions whether they are doing everything they could to break down negative gender stereotypes, the state moves forward.

California has come a long way in the last 15 years, but we have a long way still to go. Every community member needs to be assured:

- that they'll be able to get the basic health care they need;
- that, if they are the victim of a crime, the defendant won't be allowed to reduce their culpability by playing on anti-transgender bias;
- that police officers won't profile them as criminals; and,
- that their transition won't be used against them in deciding whether they or their ex-spouse is the better parent.

Each of us has work to do in this movement that is about so much. It's about gender, power, class, and culture. But, at its heart, it is about the opportunity to be accepted as ourselves. I know that the transgender people and their families I work with everyday are doing everything they can to make sure that opportunity isn't missed. Now is a good time for all fair minded people of the state to do the same.

Christopher Daley is the Director of the Transgender Law Center. An earlier version of this essay ran as an editorial in the January 4, 2006 edition of the San Francisco Bay Guardian (www.sfbg.org)