

The Gender Identity Group History
by Barbara Cook

There must always be a beginning to every organization and I would like to give some background as to why and how the Gender Group was started and also how it progressed through the years. The organization has been the result of a number of people who thought that a good idea should be carried on, which I am proud to say has been the current result of the popularity of the current organization.

In 1966 there was a relatively young organization, started in California in 1963, which was the idea of Virginia Prince. The group was called "Phi Epsilon Phi", which was starting to become known throughout the country as a major advocate of Gender problems. During that year there were some people living in the Denver area that had joined the national group with Virginia. Virginia contacted two of the people, Barbara Cook and Maureen Warfield, as to our interest in forming a local chapter of the national organization. We met at the Furr's Cafeteria on South Colorado Boulevard and decided that we meet, dressed, once each month starting in January of 1967. We would start having the meetings at my home south of the University of Denver. We were very surprised by how fast we grew with just the 'word of mouth' promotion and the referral from the national in California. During the later part of 1967 we heard from Elaura Ann, who lived in Aurora, as to the possible membership in our group. After the usual interview she was welcomed with open arms by all the members of our group in 1968. Within about a year we had about fifteen people attending our meetings.

Shortly after making our intentions known to Virginia about starting the local chapter, Sigma, we heard from Virginia that she would be passing through the Denver area and would like to visit for a few days and meet with all of us and our spouses. When Virginia arrived in Denver we had made a reservation at the Cosmopolitan Hotel for her. I took off two days from work and proceeded to give Virginia a tour of our Rocky Mountain Area. She was very impressed and really enjoyed seeing the town of Evergreen, where we had lunch one day. On the last evening that Virginia was in town we had dinner with three of our members, Barb, Maureen and Elaura Ann in the Cosmopolitan Dinning Room. Maureen and Elaura Ann both were joined by their spouses as I was not married at that period in time. After a little conversation after dinner Virginia mentioned that she would like a private meeting with the spouses. They adjourned to Virginia's room and talked for about an hour. We never did hear what was discussed, but this would affect our group a great deal in the future.

At that time our group had to be somewhat "in the closet" as there was a city ordinance against 'cross-dressing' in public. We were safe meeting in

a home, but we had to be very careful whenever we ventured out into the public areas for shopping or other activities. This worked out quite well, but after a few months Elaura Ann told us that she was forced to drop out of our group due to pressure from her spouse, which was a reaction that had been precipitated by the talk in the Hotel room with Virginia. This was our first lost member, very sad for all of us.

This early group progressed, meeting at my home, for the next five years. In 1969 I purchased some land in Elbert County, about 50 miles southeast of Denver. This property was raw land and I did not have a residence on the land until July of 1971. I had become married in 1970, and decided to move to the ranch in 1971. Maureen took over the leadership of the group and started to meet at one of the local Hotels, as her other half would not accept the group in their home. Maureen's other half was aware of her activities but did not wish to become involved in any of the group meetings. This conflict, I have often felt was also a development from the meeting with Virginia at the Cosmo Hotel.

During the late 60's and 70's we had a member of our group that was also a member of the "Turnabout Review" which was a 'Drag' show that had been performing throughout Colorado. His name was Dick Reece and was from a very prominent Denver family. Due to pressure on the City by our group and aided by the pressure of the Reece family the cross-dressing ordinance was repealed on October of 1974. Many of the members of the "Turnabout Review" were also members of our Sigma Chapter. Changing this ordinance opened the door for all of the local 'Drag' shows that we find so common in the taverns in town today.

Even though Virginia was the strong leader of the national organization, Carol Beecroft was the editor of the two publications published periodically by the Chevalier Publishing, which was owned by Virginia. These were the 'Femme Mirror' and the monthly publication called 'Transvestia'. Also they published a number of other books which were sold to the members of the 'Phi Epsilon Phi' This organization had developed into quite a financial operation which was constantly growing as the membership grew, and is still a major distributor of printed material.

In the early 70's, Virginia had to change the name of the organization. This was due to pressure from the national Fraternal Council which believed that the name of the group reflected an affiliation with their Fraternal groups on College Campuses throughout the country. The name was changed to "Tri-Ess", which has remained the same for a number of years.

In the late 60's and early 70's I began to take electrolysis treatments through the 'Gregory System' to remove any hair that I had on my face. I met a young lady, Louanne Carter, that was just starting out in the business. Through the following years I continued with Luanne and recommended her service

to many of the people with our organization. Eventually she established the "Hairfree Colorado" which has been very successful in current years.

During the early 1970's I kept in contact with the members of the group but was only able to attend a few meetings. At this same time a number of 'TV' organizations were formed. A local group called the 'Mountain Rose Society' (MRS) was formed by Kim in 1979, who was also a member of our organization. This group included a number of our members and proved to be a great asset to the 'TV' community. There was a group in Seattle that was formed, called "The Empathy Club" which went national and proved to be equal to the 'Phi Epsilon Phi' group. This group was lead by Charles Slavik, and also published a newsletter called "The New Trenna" magazine. Also during that period a group in Boston made an active attempt to become national, but this group never became very well known in this part of the country.

In November of 1976 I sold my property in Elbert County and returned to Denver. Upon my return to the City I once again started to become involved in the meetings of the group. Also we started to once again have meetings held in my home in Southwest Denver. Many of the members were people that I had known when I was active in the 60's. We met each month and because a number of the members were also in the 'MRS' group we had our meetings at different times of the month.

Our organization was always interested in getting the information about our group out to the public without jeopardizing the security of our members. We had our name registered with a new 'Gay' group which was starting to become strong in the community, it was called the 'Gay and Lesbian Center'. The 'Gay' community seemed to accept our type of lifestyle much easier than the straight members of society. Because of this contact we had a number of new members that became interested in our group.

In the late 70's Virginia decided to sell the whole operation to Carol, who had been working with her for a number of years. Shortly after Carol took over the leadership of the national organization she contacted me and said that she would like to attend one of our local meetings and meet with our members. I was very pleased and we discussed this at our next meeting. In 1979 Carol had made a short visit, spending only the day of the meeting in town. At that time she said that she would like to return and meet all of the members and their spouses, which sounded like a very good idea. Also during that period Carol and I had many discussions about our membership, as she felt that all of our members should also be members of the national group. For the national this would be a good idea but on the local scene many of our members would not be eligible to be a member of the national. This situation remained as long as we had a connection with the National Group.

In December of 1979 we were contacted by the G & L Center and asked if we could furnish two people to give a discussion of Gender problems for a class at the University of Colorado, Auraria Campus. The instructor, Ann Bolin, was teaching a class in Anthropology. Sonja Smith and myself were selected to meet with the class and give a brief lecture and answer any questions that the students wanted to ask us. Also for that meeting a local psychologist, Tomye Kelley, was invited to participate in discussing the problems which were gender related to our lifestyle. We found out later through some discussions with Ann that she was also writing a Doctoral Theses on the affect of Transvestites and Transsexuals in society today. She asked us, Sonja, Tomye and myself if we would consider getting involved in her research. We all accepted and I invited her to participate in our meetings each month, which she became very involved and helped us all very much. Eventually she completed her dissertation, it was called "In Search of Eve". I made a number of copies and gave some to the Gender Center, but I believe they have all disappeared.

On Friday March 28, 1980 we were contacted by KBDI-TV 12, a new TV station in Denver. They wished to have a program about our organization which we were very pleased to participate. The program was called "Gender Identity Awareness" and had a number of our group along with Dr. Anthony Gotlieb, a local Psychiatrist. The program was a great success for us and also for the TV station, as we received a number of new members and also the station ran the program about four or five times over the next two years. This was great except that some of our people started to be recognized in the community as they had gone full-time. To some of our members it was a little embarrassing each time that it was shown.

In June of 1980 Carol notified me that she would like to spend a little time with us in Denver. So I scheduled a barbecue to give Carol an opportunity to meet all of our members and families. This was held on June 13, 1980 and had a 100% attendance. After Carol returned to California I received a letter from her explaining to me that our group was only available to "TV's" and that we should ask the "TS" members to drop out of our group. We had three members that were "TS" at that time. One of these persons was 'Sonja Smith', who had been a member for about two or three years. Also at that time our secretary, Cheri Bancroft, who lived in Fort Collins, was also notified of this decision. Both of us were livid about the response from Carol and at our next meeting we all decided to withdraw from the "Tri-Ess" organization.

We continued to meet once a month but we changed the name officially of our group to the "Gender Group". We started to have our meetings at the new 'Gay & Lesbian Center' once a month. This lasted for a couple of months until we were forced to change our meetings due to pressure from a number of the Lesbian members that did not understand us and thought that our presence

detracted from the basic concept of the organization. We were given the opportunity to have our meetings at a business which was located in the 1300 block of Welton. This was the place of business of one of our members and worked out quite well except that a number of our members did not like walking the streets in the evenings downtown. So we once again moved to meeting at Sonja's house which was located in the 200 block of West Cedar. This worked quite well until Sonja moved again to the 1300 block of St. Paul. Sonja's new partner was not very happy with our meetings at their home and after a few months we moved to the basement of a church close to Sonja's house where we remained for about nine months.

Through discussions our members and a few other people (MRS), we decided to bring together our group with two other groups in Denver, all under the name of the 'Gender Group'. This move almost doubled the number of members that we had and established one meeting each week for our combined membership, this was held on Monday nights which still continues to this day.

About that time one of our members, Penny Larson, was operated on by Dr. Stanley Biber in Trinidad, which was the main location for gender surgery at that time. Penny stayed with me for about ten days to recover from the operation and get accustomed to her new physical situation before moving to Las Vegas.

Tomye Kelly had taken a very active part in our new gender group which for her was quite rewarding, as a number of our members became her clients for counseling. Tomye became the main contact for all of us in preparation for any surgery that we wished to have in the future. Tomye also became quite well known in the Gender Circles throughout the country.

A residence was purchased by Tomye and Dale on June 22, 1983 at 3715 West 32nd avenue. Tomye offered us the opportunity to rent the building from them at a very reasonable rate. This was very satisfactory for us as we could have our meetings there and also if we wished to just relax anytime, day or night.

Maureen wished to have someplace in which she could keep some of her femme clothing. She built a number of cabinets in the kitchen area that could be locked and called this the 'Gold Card Room'. This was for the use of members which wished to store their things at the house and there was a nominal monthly charge. This proved to be a great addition to our organization for many years. About this time Sonja withdrew from our group but stayed in contact for many years even after moving to Florida.

Monday was established as our main weekly meetings and we also started to have special meetings on other days during the week. Because of this new location we also became very well established in the community and it gave us a certain amount of prestige in both the Straight and Gay communities, which has been carried forth into the present time.

The next member of our original group to have surgery was 'Dee', who was operated on here in Denver by Dr. Edward A. Rhodes. I am still in contact with 'Dee' through these many years. Ever since her surgery she has withdrawn from any contact with the group, which was very common for almost all of our members that went through the procedure.

'Dee' was responsible for one of the rules that are mentioned at the start of each meeting. Dee was walking, doing some shopping, in the Larimer Street area and one of our members noticed her and made contact with her in a very loud manner. At the time it was very embarrassing for Dee and we started asking the other members to show a little respect for our members if any contact is made out in public.

Sonja was the next person to have the surgery in the late 80's, followed by 'Jan' who had her surgery in the early 90's. A number of the original people are still in the Denver area, except for 'Shirley' who went for the operation in Canada in 2001, and now lives in Pueblo. Sonja moved to Florida and as I understand, died there on October 8, 1999 of Cancer. The last time I talked to Sonja was at our ten year reunion of the Gender Group that was held at the Ramada Inn on East Colfax in October of 1988. She mentioned that she was going to return to Florida and get married in the near future. That was the last time that I had any contact with Sonja.

In 1989, Tomye and Dale sold the property on West 32nd avenue. The 'GIC' found a new location at 1455 Ammons street, which is the present location of all of our meetings. Through the years the Group have been in many locations all in the same building.

Maureen and I are about the only two people that have not had the operation from the original group. We both stay in touch and occasionally visit one of the meetings. Maureen is still a yearly member of the GIC, and is the only member remaining from the original group.

In the mid 90's 'Tri-Ess' made an attempt to restart a local chapter here in Denver. The people involved could not get the group to be very active and after a few months, again went out of business in this area. This is one of the reasons that we formed the Gender Group and because of good leadership through the years is still very active in the community.

In conclusion, there have been a great number of people that have been members of the 'GIC' through the years. A number of these people have passed away, but their contributions will continue to be remembered through the strength that they have given to the organization. Marureen Warfield has continued to be the glue that has held the group together and continues to be the longest continual member in the group. Tomye Kelley has always been behind our group to give us support and counseling as we have moved from year

to year. These two people have given so much that they should continue to be recognized for their efforts as the 'GIC' would not have grown without their continued support. I was privileged to be a member off and on through the years and am very proud to say that our efforts have not been in vain.

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