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Out of the medical-model two-gender box and into the fire of the Boston FTM Conference – a call for inclusion and unity

*by Bet Power, founder and director of the East Coast Female-to-Male Group
and curator of the Sexual Minorities Archives*

I am a non-hormone, non-operative female-to-male transsexual, heterosexual in my orientation. I have been processing my transsexualism since 1980. I had a four-year friendship with Lou Sullivan in the late 1980's, and I founded the East Coast FTM Group (ECFTMG) in March 1992, after Lou died. I have spoken extensively on FTM tg/ts at colleges in New England, at Pride marches, and before supportive organizations. I also continue to develop sizable holdings on transgender within the Sexual Minorities Archives.

Group history ECFTMG was the first all-FTM group on the East Coast, preceded only by The Adam Society, a discussion group that met occasionally at IFGE in Waltham, MA from 1989 to 1991. ECFTMG originally met in both the Boston area and in Northampton, and later centralized its meetings in Northampton, a very queer town located in the western part of Massachusetts, 100 miles west of Boston. ECFTMG is the longest-standing FTM group on the East Coast – it has met continuously for 5 ½ years and has always included the full spectrum of FTMs and our partners, with programming for post-ops, pre-ops, non-ops, gender blended, crossdressers, and partners. Our meetings bring together brothers from all of the New England states, from New York and New Jersey, as well as more local guys from Massachusetts. **Notwithstanding its proud history, ECFTMG has nevertheless been excluded from the Boston FTM Conference upcoming in August.**

Personal history I have decided to continue to enhance my masculinity through natural means, without chemicals or surgery. I have many reasons for this decision: among them, spiritual, physical, financial, moral, emotional, and political reasons. My decision came gradually and carefully and is personal to me. I support my FTM brothers who have chosen to medically transition, and I support other brothers like me who have chosen a different path and view. I was blessed to have been close to Lou as my first FTM contact because he taught me not only about owning my true spirit, but also about 100% inclusion of all FTM transgendered as brothers in the community he worked so hard to begin. Just read any of the first few years' issues of the FTM newsletter (out of SF and Oakland), and you will find Lou tirelessly answering letters from FTMs in a constant spirit of nonjudgmental inclusion and unity. He knew it was our only chance at achieving rights and respect in this society – to be one, to include crossdressers to transsexuals, to let nothing divide our FTM brotherhood.

Today, notwithstanding my personal efforts, I feel brokenhearted because I am not allowed to participate in the leadership and organization of the Boston FTM Conference. Perhaps you feel the same sense of shock as I do, that this has happened. It never should have. Here are the facts:

March-April In March, when I became aware the conference was going forward on the East Coast, I was excited about its nearby location and spoke with Mykael and Jeannette Hawley, who are part of the conference steering committee. It was apparent to me that leadership meetings had been held and that we at ECFTMG had not been informed of these meetings. Conference planning had already gone quite a distance, at this point. I told Jeannette and Mykael that I wanted ECFTMG to be actively involved, that I wanted to be part of the steering committee, and that I wanted to present and coordinate two workshops at the conference – one on “Transnatural: the FTM path without hormones or surgery;” the other, “Reclaiming our own from lesbian literature and history.” Initially, in March, my availability got a cool, non-supportive response from Mykael and Jeannette. As conference planning proceeded in April, I again

offered to them my availability and I also asked why I and ECFTMG had been left out of the loop of information about the meeting locations and times, and how we could be an active part of the conference. Mykael told me that Mike Kirk, another steering committee member, had a phone list he had used to call those individuals and organizations he wanted to participate – and that I and ECFTMG were not on his list. Mykael said there was nothing he could do about my wish to participate because “Mike knows what he wants” for the conference. Mykael also told me that, “Nobody knows you, Bet. Nobody knows who you are.” And he stated, “You live out in the middle of nowhere” (that is, not in Boston). Jeannette shortly afterwards told me that she had “pressed the steering committee for inclusion” (of non-ops), but she “had not been heard.” She said there were FTMs on the committee that “had something against me as an individual.” She said those included Mike Kirk and Henry Rubin. She was nevertheless, herself, going to continue to work on the partners portion of the conference. *This mistreatment of me by Mykael and Jeannette is particularly tragic – I was Best Man for their union ceremony, I located a job for Mykael at IFGE, I helped them relocate to New England from Spokane, and I’ve had a best friendship with Jeannette for 12 years. Politics, and a modicum of power, it seems, can destroy all of that.*

On April 13, I called Mike Kirk to again make myself available to be part of conference leadership, to present workshops, to get ECFTMG involved, and to question what was going on. I was perplexed by the resentment Jeannette had said was being directed at me by Kirk and Rubin, and I tried to get to the bottom of it. I scarcely know these two – I haven’t seen them in five years and have had no social contact with Kirk in over ten years. Nor have we had any conflict of which I am aware. After ten days when Kirk did not return my call, I called him again on April 23 and left another message requesting involvement in the conference for ECFTMG and myself and stated that I wanted to discuss these matters. I told Kirk the hours I was reachable by phone. Then, a few days later – at a time when I had stated I would not be at home – Kirk left a one-sentence rejection on my answering machine, saying, “I want you to know that the workshop slots have been taken.” That’s it. No discussion. No acknowledgment that there was a group of FTMs feeling hurt and confused by this behavior, no openness to the need to organize programming about non-hormone, non-op FTM issues. Matter closed.

After being told by Kirk that the conference was closed to my participation, I spoke about these events with James Green. James confirmed that as of April (and, in fact, up until today), workshop slots are indeed still open and conference programming is still being created. Kirk had simply refused my voice in the conference and that of the inclusive organization that I lead. Others filled me in on the feeling of exclusion at last year’s FTM conference in Seattle – that non-hormone, non-op FTMs and partners were made to feel like “the ladies auxiliary” by some of the pre-op and post-op FTMs in attendance there. I missed last year’s conference, so I was unaware of any “camps” forming among FTMs. I must tell you that I am shocked and deeply frustrated to hear of this – and I believe we better “nip in the bud” any developing divisiveness.

Next, on May 31 I called another conference steering committee member, Henry Rubin. He called me back on June 8. First, I checked on the mysterious grudge I was told he and Mike Kirk had against me. Rubin said he “has no personal animosity” toward me, however, his friend Kirk does and even though he (Rubin) doesn’t know what it’s about, he “sides with Kirk out of loyalty.” He told me the conference was being organized by “a close network of friends.” *Again, this is particularly ironic and sad: Kirk is a guy whose very first contact with and information about FTMs came from me – I sent him a copy of Lou Sullivan’s first booklet, in the early ‘90s. Further, the very first FTM meetings both Kirk and Rubin attended were at ECFTMG! Not to mention my close (until now) friendship with Jeannette and Mykael.*

I proceeded to ask Rubin for three things: that I be part of the leadership/steering committee of the conference, organizing programming for/about non-hormone, non-op FTMs (after all, leadership is a long-standing role I have in this community); and that I present the two workshops I have mentioned above. He would not agree to including me in the conference leadership. He deferred it to a discussion he said he would have later with the steering committee. However, to date, I have not heard back from anyone on this, and to date, not one call to me has been initiated by anyone on the committee. He said my workshop on reclaiming FTMs from lesbian history would be “too academic for this conference” (although he had not

even heard my actual workshop idea and approach); and he said I could look into sitting on the one panel that was being formed to discuss non-op options.

As of today (June 23), I and ECFTMG are no further along with this committee and conference than we were at the beginning of the year. We are still being excluded, discriminated against, ignored, disrespected, and simply not allowed to be a part of the conference or to have a voice there.

Why has this happened? It never should have.

For two reasons, I believe: (1) The steering committee's unwillingness to share power/leadership with a well-established FTM group, and (2) The steering committee's exclusive commitment to pre-op and post-op FTMs, allowing only those to lead whose path is (or is connected to) the medical model of hormones and SRS.

Many of us are fed up with the "unspoken hierarchy" and this type of separatism.

We don't think it's appropriate for one portion of the FTM community (those medically transitioning) to communicate superiority over other portions. We don't buy that there is only "one right way" (read, Immaculate Perception) to be or live if you're FTM. Yet this is the loud message that shook many of us when Mike Kirk recently publicly pressured an FTM out of an Enterprise meeting because he was not moving toward SRS fast enough and had serious questions. (Enterprise is a Boston-area support group for medically-transitioning FTM transsexuals only.)

All our lives, we've been told by society that we are not doing life "the right way." Must we also now hear that from other FTMs?

Questions for the steering committee/issues for this conference:

1. Why does conference advertising call this an "all-FTM conference" when the conference mission statement (read to me by Rubin) says it is "for any FTM who is living as a man."

That's a big difference in meaning. I'll wager most FTMs would not describe our realities that way. Many might say, "I am living as transgendered," "I am living as transsexual," "I am living as myself," or several other possibilities. I would say precisely, "I am a straight man who does not intend to chemically or surgically alter his female body – get used to it."

2. Why, for the same conference fee, are non-hormone and non-SRS FTMs not getting an equal amount of programming?

For example, why are our issues relegated to only one workshop slot? Why, since there is a full day of hormone and SRS information and support provided (Aug. 10: 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.), isn't there also a full day of alternative transnatural information and support provided? Let's hear also from the vendors of comfortable binding, packing, and prosthetic products; and voice trainers, weight-loss specialists, bodybuilders, clothiers, barbers, makeup artists, and nutritionists knowledgeable about plant androgens.

3. Why is there no non-hormone/non-op FTM on the steering committee to help make these things happen – even though I have repeatedly offered and even insisted?

4. Why are no non-SRS FTMs addressing the entire conference as speakers? We have prominent community leaders of this sort on the East Coast who were not invited and who feel unwelcome.

5. Who is benefiting more from this conference – the medical providers or all FTMs? Only two FTMs are in fact scheduled to be key speakers, both of them in the medical process. The remaining key conference speakers are medical providers.

6. Why is the steering committee putting personalities before principles when it stoops to vague personal grudges? Isn't unity and inclusion most important in our small and fledgling movement?

Some of us think society is wrong about two-gender expression and needs to be changed – not us and not our bodies. Some in the tg/ts movement are gender-conforming while others are gender-disruptive. We may have separate issues but we have a common foe: the oppression of us as transgendered by society, regardless of which path we choose. We need all of our voices to be heard, in order to identify the common notes.

I believe the answer is a unified conference that values and includes all FTM voices equally while it treats each and every FTM respectfully. I am asking the steering committee for an apology to ECFTMG and to me.

I and ECFTMG will not be able to attend the Boston FTM Conference. Still, this is our contribution. Hey guys, I'm channelling Uncle Lou Sullivan. He says he's turning over right now in San Francisco Bay.

Please send your opinions and requests for unity and inclusion to: BFTMC, P.O. Box 193, Bellingham, MA 02019, or call Mike Kirk (617.639.7968), Henry Rubin (617.441.5165), or Mykael or Jeannette Hawley (through IFGE at 617.899.2212).

Come join a post-conference discussion for all FTMs and partners about our community needs going forward—to be held at ECFTMG on Sunday, August 10 from 6:00 to 9:00 p.m., at 146 Riverbank Road, Northampton, Massachusetts. For more information, call Bet Power at 413.584.7616.

Directions to Northampton from Boston:

Mass Turnpike (Rte. 90) west to exit 4(Springfield/Holyoke). After the toll booth, head toward Holyoke (Rte. 91 North). Take Rte. 91 North to the second Northampton exit, exit 19. Take a left at the bottom of the ramp, onto Rte. 9 West. Proceed for about 2 blocks and take a left at Old Ferry Road. After ½ mile, take a left at Cross Path Road. After ¼ mile, take a right onto Riverbank Road. After this turn, 146 Riverbank Road is the 4th house on the left.