

Hotter Than July! to host transgender summit

Panelists to discuss Henry Benjamin Standards of Care

BY DAWN WOLFE GUTTERMAN

DETROIT - Detroit's Black Gay Pride celebration isn't forgetting the "T" in LGBT. On July 29, two prominent members of the transgender community will discuss, explain and dissect the Henry Benjamin Standards of Care, a set of rules that mental health professionals and surgeons follow in the treatment of transgender patients.

The summit is being organized by Demetrius Taylor, a.k.a. Samantha Stephens-Divinity, a drag performer and founder of the House of Divinity, a support organization for transgender persons in Detroit.

"I've taken hold of this because I know a lot of my trans sisters who are stuck in a rut," said Taylor of both the House of Divinity and his work organizing the summit. "They've been kicked out of their homes, because of their issues ... and a lot of them are homeless."

Taylor is excited about the event's panelists: Rachel Crandall, MSW, the founder and executive director of TransGender Michigan, and Dr. Marci Bowers, M.D., a transgender gynecologist who performs gender reassignment surgery.

Taylor called Bowers' practice "a huge step within the trans community, because



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- Surgeon and transwoman
Dr. Marci Bowers

we have one of our own who understands the medical issues dealing with transgenderism."

"She understands us, she's very sensitive to us, she's undergone the surgery herself," Taylor said of Bowers. "So I'm so excited about this, I'm very excited, because for once we can put a genuine trans face on genuine trans issues and actually help Detroit come up with its own solutions."

For her part, Bowers is eager to explain the positive and negative aspects of the Henry Benjamin rules.

During a June 22 interview with *Between The Lines*, Bowers explained that the Henry Benjamin standards are, "designed to be measures of patient protection that allow a person to proceed through a gender transition." However, "There are many inconsistencies within the standards, they're enforced unequally and many patients see them not as protections but as obstacles. And that's not right, that's not really fair."

One of the problems with the standards, according to Bowers, is the power they give to mental health professionals, who must provide a letter saying that the patient is ready for gender reassignment surgery before most surgeons in the U.S. will perform it.

"Unfortunately, the way it is now is that therapists, psychologists hold this promise of a letter to go forward with genital surgery out as their holy grail," she said. "I've heard of some cases where the closer some people get the more sessions are required. It's fairly shameful sometimes. Or [the mental health professionals] just have their own version of what the person should be, and that's not supposed to be a criteria anymore."

Another problem with the standards is that they classify Gender Identity Dysphoria as a mental illness.

"There is no evidence at all that gender dysphoria is a mental illness, anymore than homosexuality was years ago," Bowers said. "The real harm in calling it a mental illness ... [is that doing so] condones stigmatization of those with gender identity dysphoria as mentally ill and perpetuates employment discrimination, violence against transgender individuals, etc."

Bowers said that Gender Identity Dysphoria is "biological, and it doesn't go away with any therapy you employ. You're not going to get rid of it; it's just part of the human condition. It's not the devil's work, like the fear-minded religious right would have us believe."

Taylor said that the summit is open to transgender and non-transgender individuals alike.

"Every time I do the summit I make it inclusive for everyone," he said, adding that he encourages trans allies to attend as well.

"We cannot do this alone, without allies," he said. "And we've got to build our allies because nobody wants to understand this community. And we can't get you to understand it if we don't teach you how to understand it."

The theme of the Hotter Than July! 2005 Transgender Summit is "What is your 'T'?" The summit will be held at The Hilton Gardens Inn at 351 Gratiot Ave. in Detroit from 7-9:30 p.m. Friday, July 29. For more information call Demetrius Taylor at 313-935-0183.

From Left to Right: Rachel Crandall, MSW, will talk about the Harry Benjamin Standards of Care at the HTJ! trans summit July 29. BTL photo: Matthew Barton

Demetrius Taylor, a.k.a. Samantha Stephens-Divinity, is organizing the 2005 Transgender summit for Hotter Than July!

Dr. Marci Bowers, is coming from Colorado to give her professional opinion as a physician, as well as her views as a transwoman, on the Harry Benjamin standards. Photo courtesy: Dr. Marci Bowers

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