

Upfront

MANY PEOPLE BELIEVE THAT GOD HATES GAYS, BUT GOD DOES NOT HATE ANYONE. **”**
Mr Gay Namibia contestant Wendelinus Hamutenya >12

SOCIAL MEDIA

Facebook to terminate gay rights group

New rules mean movement will be silenced

Rob Salerno

THE CREATOR OF ONE OF FACEBOOK'S largest gay rights groups is launching a last-ditch effort to save the two-million-person movement before Facebook eliminates existing groups and changes its rules.

Torontonian Sharon Love created the "I bet we can find 1,000,000 people who support same sex marriage" Facebook group in January 2010, and in just under a month, the group ballooned to more than 2.1 million members.

But Facebook has decided to recreate its "Groups" function for smaller social circles while moving larger social movements and fan groups into its "Pages" function. However, Facebook isn't automatically turning old groups into pages — Love would have to restart her group from scratch if she wanted to create a new page.

Some old groups are being "archived," which preserves the group page but erases its membership. Other old groups are allowed to upgrade to Facebook's new groups model, but Love says Facebook won't let her group upgrade because it is too large and doesn't have enough recent activity. It currently receives about 100 posts per month on its group wall.

"We determined what groups to archive based on a number of factors, including the amount of recent activity," says Andrew Noyes, a spokesperson for Facebook. "We're currently working on ways to refine our systems so as to not accidentally archive or move groups that were incorrectly characterized, and we appreciate user feedback as we do so."

Noyes did not respond to a follow-up email asking if Facebook would

“I REALLY WANTED TO DO SOMETHING TO SAVE LIVES OF BULLIED LGBT YOUTH.”

— Sharon Love

allow Love to transfer her group membership into a Facebook page.

Love, who is a lesbian, says she was inspired to create her group by her cousin, who committed suicide several years ago.

"I really wanted to do something to save lives of bullied LGBT youth," she says. "I thought I could get a million people together to create a safe space for youth. I would get notices from Facebook friends, friends of friends, people who were on the edge, at risk of suicide, and I would send them to this group and say, 'People want you to live!'"



Facebook's new rules mean this gay rights group will lose its two million members.

NEWS

Trans people and passports

Federal government says surgery a prerequisite for gender change

Andrea Houston

TALIA JOHNSON IS NERVOUS about travelling. One look at her passport tells border guards everything they need to know about her gender status.

Johnson, who has had her name legally changed, now wants to change the sex designation on her passport — a simple correction from "m" to "f" — to ensure all her documents accurately reflect her gender.

The federal government says trans people must undergo sex reassignment surgery (SRS) or provide a letter guaranteeing the procedure will take place within a year.

The Ottawa resident has not yet had SRS, mainly due to the financial cost of the surgery. She would also have to take time off work and travel to Toronto. "The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health [CAMH] in Toronto is the only organization in Ontario that offers SRS. There is a long wait and it's not easy to get."

"The status now is I don't have a passport. Without the sex designation change, trans people are put in constant danger while travelling under the assumed sex. At this point in my life, I will have trouble if I travel."

Susan Gapka, chair of the Trans Health Lobby Group, has been working on this issue for years. Her group is pushing to make transitioning easier by opening up access to SRS and removing the red tape around changing legal documents.

"If your legal documents don't match at the border, there could be problems," Gapka says. "I have had bad experiences at the airport. You can be singled out for looking different. A police officer could ask questions. It opens the door to harassment and discrimination."

Gapka and Johnson both agree that surgery does not determine whether a person is trans.

Gender identity is complex, Gapka says. At the root is a misconception that a person's sex is biologically determined, but for trans people, there is a mismatch between body and gender.

Transition is fluid and can take many forms over a number of years. Some trans people never undergo surgery; some simply "pass" or choose



Talia Johnson wants her passport to reflect her gender.

to play with gender roles. For others, hormones are enough. Each experience is unique.

Gapka says this is a concept the federal government can't seem to grasp. "There's a lot of variables when it comes to transsexual surgery," she says. "There are differences between surgery for trans men and trans women... We really need to make it easier for people's legal documents to match who they really are."

Passport Canada declined an interview with Xtra. Instead, spokesper-

son Béatrice Fénelon sent an email response that confirmed the current policy. If the applicant has not undergone SRS, medical documentation must be provided stating that the applicant will be undergoing surgery in the next 12 months.

The fight to change sex designation on legal documents is ongoing between the trans community and all levels of government, Gapka says. The law is forcing people to be dishonest, she says. The system should make it

easy for people to update their legal documents. Gapka would like to see the system harmonized and modernized. "We have a passport that uses one criteria; we have a driver's licence in Ontario that uses a different criteria, then other ID like the birth certificate, which uses a different criteria."

At the provincial level, activists are pushing to change the Vital Statistics Act, which is the governing document for all personal statistics. "The name, sex, place of birth and the parents are all recorded at birth," says Gapka. In Ontario, the government requires a medical letter confirming SRS before allowing a change in the birth certificate. Government policies for other documentation vary, but many ask for medical proof that the individual is transsexual rather than accept self-identification.

"It should be easy for people. These regulations are 30 to 40 years out of date," says Gapka.

NDP MPP Cheri DiNovo (Parkdale-High Park) is tabling Bill 70, known as Toby's Act, for the fourth time on Feb 21. The bill would insert "gender identity" into the Ontario Human Rights Code. If it were to be adopted, the door would open for challenges to other rules, like those that govern the vital statistics on legal documents, DiNovo says.

"That's the first thing that needs to happen because it all comes from that," she says. "The bill will allow challenges to anything that isn't inclusive for trans folks. If you can't discriminate on the basis of gender identity under the OHRC, then accommodation will have to be made in terms of everything else, and documentation is part of that."

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— Talia Johnson