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## Bar says no to LeatherSIR contest

by Zak Szymanski | Wednesday February 1, 2006

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The manager of the South of Market venue that has traditionally hosted the local LeatherSIR/boy competition has asked that the early July event be held somewhere else this year due to controversy surrounding the contest's policy prohibiting transgender men from competing, according to the producer of the San Francisco title.

Scott Peterson, manager of the Powerhouse bar, confirmed that plans to host the competition are on hold indefinitely while the community continues to dialogue about the issue.

Meanwhile, the Northern California regional contest "which is scheduled to return to San Francisco after a five-year absence and will feature a competition between winners from this city, Sacramento, and the Russian River" will go on as planned on July 29, according to the event's co-producer Jay Hemphill, though he does not yet have a venue.

Hemphill and his partner Michael Holeman, the event's co-producer, are also chair and vice-chair of the San Francisco Pride Parade's leather contingent, but the LeatherSIR/boy controversy was not addressed as some had expected at the January 28 contingent meeting.

"I wanted to keep it separate because they are two different things," Hemphill told the *Bay Area Reporter* on Tuesday, January 31. "The LeatherSIR contest was not brought up, and I did not bring it up."

These most recent developments come a few weeks after longtime leather activist Peter Fiske "who served as San Francisco's male leather marshal in last year's Pride Parade" called for the voluntary resignations of Hemphill and Holeman as contingent leaders so as not to give the appearance that the parade contingent was connected to anything discriminatory or that the entire leather community

endorsed the policies of LeatherSIR/boy. Supporters of the transgender community and Fiske's position (<https://www.facebook.com/BayAreaReporter/>) (<https://www.twitter.com/ebarnews/>) circulated a letter promising to boycott spaces with transgender discriminatory policies, while many in the (<https://www.ebar.com/rss.php>) (<https://www.youtube.com/c/BayAreaReporterSF>) leather community accused Fiske of being divisive.

Following the publication of that letter, combined with an article in the *B.A.R.*, Fiske has since declined to speak further on the matter so that the conversation will not center on his role in the controversy but instead on the policy itself.

"I will be making no further comments, either public or private, so the community can focus on the real discussion," said a statement from Fiske. "The leather community needs to decide whether and on what basis trans men (and women) can participate. I believe in the ultimate fairness and decency of the community."

Additionally, sources say that Hemphill and Holeman's leadership, combined with their recent efforts to separate Pride business from LeatherSIR/boy business "have made it likely that the two will remain leaders of the parade contingent.

Hemphill and Rod Wood, the producer of the San Francisco LeatherSIR/boy contest, both expressed support for transgenders and offered to help create and produce separate contests for that community.

"I certainly am not against the transgender community and I would be happy to help them start a contest at any time," Hemphill told the *B.A.R.* "Many of my friends are transgenders."

Wood said he received a note on January 23 from the Powerhouse's Peterson informing him that the South of Market District bar no longer felt good about hosting the contest due to the controversy. Wood echoed sentiments that the controversy has created a division and said efforts would be better spent creating an event for transgenders rather than tearing down existing contests that excluded them.

"Given the situation, I can understand, and I have absolutely no ill-will toward him or the staff or owners of the Powerhouse," said Wood, a former Northern California Mr. Drummer titleholder who clarified that San Francisco has hosted its own local LeatherSIR/boy contest almost consistently since 2003, with a gap last year due to the fact that there was no regional sponsor for Northern California at the time. "But it puts me in an awkward position. The rules for the ILSb are clear and haven't changed. If a transgender were to win a local contest, then a regional contest, he would not be able to compete for the international title."

Local contests feed into the regionals "like the event produced by Hemphill and Holeman this year" which then feed into the international competition held in Atlanta in October. The policy prohibiting transgender men "phrased as a "born male" pledge for contestants to sign off on" is the policy of the international LeatherSIR/boy organization based in Pittsburgh. Depending upon who is asked, Leather SIR/boy is sometimes called the successor to the International Drummer competitions, which also had an understood policy of transgender male exclusion for many years.

"I helped get Peter Fiske to be the Den Dad at the 2003 Northern California LeatherSIR/boy contest by offering for him to stay at my home at the River. And Peter was one of my judges for the San Francisco LeatherSIR and Leatherboy contest in 2004. So I find it interesting that Peter suddenly says, 'We are now welcoming a new discrimination to San Francisco,' when he was so closely involved in two of the contests," said an e-mail from Wood. (During interviews for the earlier *B.A.R.* article, Fiske said he had chosen this year to act because the international leadership failed to change its policy at its recent October gathering despite concerns he already raised.)

"The LeatherSIR/Leatherboy contests celebrate a certain kind of man. It does not celebrate straight men, women (gay or straight), transgenders (MTF or FTM), female drag, or dozens of other niches that each one of us is cubbyholed into by those who we see on the street," Wood continued. "The only one of these that doesn't seem to have their own contests are the transgenders. If Peter really were the sort of leader that San Francisco needs, then he'd be working to have a transgender leather contest which celebrates and empowers, instead of trying to intimidate and destroy. And I'd be the first to sign up to help him with it."

### Sex police

Some people who support transgender inclusion note that certain statements against such inclusion sound eerily similar to the rhetoric used against gays and lesbians. They contend that creating separate systems for transgenders misses the point when it comes to transsexuals who may not actually identify as trans and instead live their lives as men and women.

"We don't want to be separated out from other men and women," said Marcus Arana, one of the co-signers of the original protest letter. "My gender identity is not about being transgender; it's about being male."

"Creating a separate contest doesn't speak to the issue," agreed Billy Lane, an out transsexual leatherman and semifinalist in the International Mr. Leather competition in 1998, who lived in San Francisco's leather community for many years. "For many people who consider themselves not necessarily transgender but transsexual there is a destination. It's not about the journey or any kind of gender-play or drag. It's about changing your entire life.

"I think a lot of people don't understand that for many of us the idea is not to end up identifying as transsexual," added Lane. "When moving from one place to another it's to live as a man or a woman. A contest just for transsexuals defeats that purpose."

Transitioning from one gender to another generally requires a diagnosis of gender identity disorder, and transsexuality is considered by many in the healthcare field to be a medical condition that can be treated with hormones and/or surgery under a doctor's supervision. "Transgender" is usually a broader umbrella term used to refer to a wide range of gender variant identities, a small portion of whom are transsexual and may not identify with the larger or more visible transgender population.

A legal gender change in the state of California also requires a doctor's authorization, and federal offices often require medical letters attesting to irreversible and/or complete surgical procedures. Such identities are recognized by the state as legal, and for those transgenders who also happen to date opposite-sex

partners, provide eligibility for marriage.  
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Gay trans people in same-sex relationships, on the other hand, cannot legally marry their partners. It's one of many similarities that a trans man may share with his other gay brothers, and those who support trans inclusion cite countless trans male narratives of having a male identity since birth, of troubled boyhoods and adolescent pressure to function in the wrong sexuality dynamic, of trans men coming out into an adulthood centered around gay male sexual circles complete with HIV concerns, taking care of older and sick men, and facing mainstream discrimination.

For Wood, the idea that a contest based upon gay male sexuality would be discriminatory is not necessarily newsworthy.

"We're all discriminatory in one way or another. When we go out, there are 'types' that we associate with, and those we don't. Individual gay men (and I'd guess women too) may have gender, ethnic, height/proportions, hair/eye color, attire, politics, economics, or other preferences in those we choose as close friends, as lovers, and as lifelong partners. It doesn't mean that we don't like those who don't fit those categories, it may just mean that we feel that we associate better with them, we understand them better, and they're more likely to represent ourselves."

But what often is not realized is that many transgender gay leathermen actually share the same discriminatory tastes for an aesthetic that is fully male-bodied and masculine. They assert that changing the policies of contests like LeatherSIR/boy would not open the floodgates to any and all trans people, nor would they want it to. They simply believe that the high standards of physicality and masculinity are something that is possible for a trans man to achieve, particularly those who "perhaps paradoxically" would not even feel all that aligned with other transgenders.

"I competed at IML in 1998. Has there been this rush of 'gender benders' since then? No," said Lane, a current judges coordinator for IML. "It's really hysterical that those who want this exclusionary policy fear that they will be overrun by 'gender benders,' but that hasn't happened in the organizations that don't have those policies."

Rules for LeatherSIR/boy do not specifically call for nudity or mandate exposure to genitals different from those usually expected, noted Lane, although Wood emphasized that contestants "must agree to appear onstage wearing appropriate leather and fetish gear and perform an onstage leather sexual fantasy of an explicit nature (while conforming with local regulations, if any, pertaining to nudity and obscenity). That could mean that the contestant might be nude onstage, depending upon the local regulations. And ... there's a possibility that the contestants may be asked to expose themselves privately to the panel of judges."

For Lane, the idea that gay men would find it impossible to relate to known transsexual men seems based in fear.

"It's scary to think that the guy you're attracted to may not have exactly what you're used to operating with. It can make people question what that says about themselves and their identity," said Lane. "But this is a contest. You can't even argue the piece about sex."

Wood, however, said that clamoring for transgender inclusion in a gay male sexuality contest appears to walk the line of policing desire. It is to be expected that a contest would hold discriminatory qualifications, he said.

"These qualifications also include other discriminatory language, such as 'same-sex oriented,' 'at least 21 years old,' and 'must have a demonstrated interest in leather.' No collegiate 20-year-old straight boys have approached me asking to run for LeatherSIR or Leatherboy. Likewise, no one has come up to me and said, 'I'd like to run for LeatherSIR this year, but I'm a trans male,'" Wood wrote in an e-mail.

In a later interview by phone, Wood added that, "We just have had no good reason to change the policy." Asked what a good reason to change the policy would be, Wood speculated if more men openly expressed desire for transgender men, that might be a compelling reason for top organizers to revisit the issue. But currently, he said, many men would be turned off after "finding out" that a man was transgender.

A LeatherSIR/boy titleholder, he said, is a representative of the title and is expected to be desired and "hit on" as he competes and fulfills his duties.

Although IML may welcome trans males, added Wood, "I think that the trans males who enter the IML circuit will find the resistance to be more covert. The result being that they're still not winning, but being given other excuses ('lousy speech,' 'mediocre physique,' 'not comfortable with his body,' 'not representative of the community,' etc.) as to their losses. At least ILSb is up-front about it."

Catch-22

The idea that a man would not be desired due to his trans status, of course, is also based upon the assumption that a trans male in a trans-inclusive competition would actually be "out," something that many choose not to do, due to fear of the very discrimination Wood referenced above.

Even Wood agrees such disclosure about one's genitals or medical history is generally not expected of anyone in non-sexual scenarios. And although titleholders would be assumed to have widespread desirability, Wood acknowledged that actually giving into others' sexual requests is not required.

Such a circular path can make it difficult to see which came first — the fear of an open trans man competing, or the fear that others may accidentally be attracted to a stealth trans man, regardless of whether a sexual interaction or anything necessitating disclosure actually takes place.

Some transgender allies said that if a trans man actually did not have what it takes to compete at LeatherSIR/boy, an exclusionary policy would not be necessary; he, like countless other gay men whose bodies, masculinities, sexualities, and leather histories don't measure up to certain standards would simply not pass muster. Indeed, agreed supporters and detractors of the policy alike, a trans man who remained

stealth and therefore free from discrimination might actually win a prominent leather title, and may already have. Part of the fear of allowing transgenders to compete, said some, is not that a trans man doesn't have what it takes "but that he does."

"It almost feels like a lack of faith in the contest itself, to talk about people who aren't expected to be competitive but whose very presence is somehow going to materially alter the competition," said Chris Daley, director of the San Francisco based Transgender Law Center and a non-transgender gay man himself. "That's obviously about people's insecurity in their own sexuality and masculinity which is probably a reaction to society and stereotypes about gay men."

"This is much more about non-transsexual men "and what they think of themselves " than it is about transsexual men," echoed Lane, who said there are many ways in which leather circles celebrate their diversity, from the presence of men in kilts to the welcoming of older boys and younger daddies. "There is so much room we make for each other in the gay leather community. What is this really about?"

Moving forward

Wood clearly understands the nuances of the argument. Walking through all the possible scenarios in which it would be unfair for trans men to compete, he noted that some trans men could have even larger than usual penises post-surgery. But he also quickly acknowledged that other contestants could have had medical and cosmetic interventions since there is no policy banning such procedures. He started to explain that he can usually tell that there is something different about trans men, "but then again," he quickly realized, he knows other men who are not transgender who have similar qualities.

He believes that childhood male socialization is important to being a man, but at the same time recognizes that many men have many different childhood experiences. He still would consider a gay man with a trans male partner to be a gay man, he said while thoughtfully considering a range of possibilities, and he was even willing to consider that transgender men could serve as male mentors to male youth.

But at a certain point, he said, a line has to be drawn when it comes to gendered and sexual spaces, and he agreed with this reporter's analogy that like same-sex marriage opponents, policymakers cannot always contemplate all the ways in which variations and exceptions "like an XXY man," he said, referring to chromosome patterns " might complicate a gender definition.

"I stand by my conclusion that ILSb looks for and celebrates a specific kind of man. Changing that, whether it's changing the Leather/BDSM aspect, the same-sex orientation, or the gender restrictions would result in a different kind of man," said Wood, who also noted in an earlier e-mail that "many (in the leather community) are offended by what's sounding like 'accept or be sued,'" when it comes to trans male inclusion.

There are no reports of formal legal action against the local contest, but Wood said that fears of lawsuits could discourage venues from hosting the event. If that happens, and he cannot find another place to hold the contest, he said he will simply appoint two men as this year's local titleholders, and those men will then advance to the regionals, assuming a venue can be found for that contest.

Local experts have described the contest's policy as a legal gray area. Daley said that while private organizations have certain liberties, he thinks it would be difficult to get around local nondiscrimination ordinances in public venues.

"Private organizations do have the right to restrict membership. However, this competition sounds like it's happening in a public place and any qualified member of the public can participate," said Daley. "If that's correct, it would be hard to understand how they can differentiate between the types of men when determining who can be a contestant."

Amidst the long, seemingly endless debate, there remain some truths. Nobody arguing for trans inclusion, for instance, is advocating that LeatherSIR/boy abandon the high standards and qualities upon which someone might be judged in the competition. Nobody is disputing that sexual and gendered spaces need to draw lines when it comes to inclusion. For those advocating trans inclusion, however, drawing that line at birth gender seems arbitrary, and some have advocated using one's legal identification instead, trusting that most men without strong male physiques probably would not enter the contest regardless of how they were raised.

"As a group I think we can be very protective of our spaces. That impulse can sometimes lead us to draw artificial boundaries," said Daley. "I think that some of the guys having problems with this inclusive policy are going to find these boundaries are incredibly artificial, and that gay transgender men are every bit as much of the community as any other group of gay men."

"Oftentimes it feels like the leather community has been incredibly inclusive, especially for those gay and bi men who didn't feel comfortable within other facets of the gay community," he added. "At the end of day this discussion is going to generate more inclusion and greater visibility of gay and bi trans men. But I do think it's going to be a painful conversation before we get there."

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