

Panel Puts a Human Face on Sexual Diversity

BY LAURA L. HILL

Denver, Jan. 19

A panel on sexual differences kicked off a three-part series on diversity today sponsored by the Rocky Mountain Joint Territory Culture Department. The four-member panel addressed gay, lesbian, bisexual and transsexual issues with three purposes in mind: 1) to increase awareness, 2) to put a human face on the issues, and 3) to create a springboard for future dialogue.

One of the motivations for the series was General Director Zaitso's fifth challenge for the SGI-USA this year: "Develop a spirit of tolerance and respect others."

As the general director states in the January *Living Buddhism*: "Through the kaleidoscope of SGI-USA activities, we can summon forth the life condition of Bodhisattva, not only with those we know and like, but also with those with whom we may not have much in common. In this way, I am convinced we can help one another rid ourselves of the senseless fear and misjudgment that often arise from diversity."

Another spark that began a fire among members in Denver was Colorado politics, specifically the passage of Amendment 2, which was subsequently overturned by the Supreme Court in May 1996. The measure would have amended the Colorado state constitution to overturn existing protections against discrimination based on sexual orientation and prohibit the passage of any such protection in the future.

Since then many Coloradans caught their collective breath and came to the realization that tolerance must be learned — which means that opportunities to teach it must be provided.

"To celebrate diversity, we first have to discover it," said Maria Guajardo-Lucero, Rocky Mountain Joint Territory Culture Department chief.

In thoughtful and honest testimonies, the four panelists provided a means of discovery as they invited the audience into their lives by explaining how their sexual differences have defined their lives.

Dr. Beth Firestein, a psychologist and bisexual, is the author/editor of *Bisexuality: The Psychology and Politics of an Invisible Minority*. She pointed out that we live in a monosexual culture that lacks the language to define sexuality outside of our culture's heterosexual bias. Dr. Firestein's presentation helped to profile the issue of inclusion and exclusion generated by sexual diversity.

This very point was forcefully brought home when Dr. Rachael St. Claire, a clinical psychologist and speaker on gender dysphoria, transsexualism and cross-dressing, described her path of defining her sexuality and gender. Born a biological male, Dr. St. Claire struggled for many years to define herself as she exists today.

Dr. St. Claire's experience portrays the strength of will required to find a place for herself in society, and she defines herself as a survivor, a rarity in people dealing with the issues she has had to face.

The next two panelists, SGI members, not only spoke about their experiences with sexual diversity but gave insightful advice on how others might face such issues. "If it's an issue for the human race, it's an issue for the SGI," was how Ann Seidl began her story. Ms. Seidl, who hosts a gay and lesbian program on a local TV station and has acted as master of ceremonies for several Denver Pridefests, said that by being different herself, she has become aware of her prejudices. She stated that we need to relate to one another as conscious human beings recognizing our prejudices and acting to overcome them.

Fear and intolerance are "symbols and symptoms of a world that needs healing," said

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Wayne Thrash, a nurse/psychotherapist specializing in HIV-related treatment and men's sexuality issues. He also pointed out how he has become aware of intolerance in his life and how this "awareness provides an opportunity for transformation. What a wonderful tool to chant and bring about transformation in the world."

During the brief discussion afterward, Dan Nash, a Culture Department member, mentioned how as an organization of individuals, the SGI reflects society in its cultural biases. These cultural biases are reflections of society, not Buddhism, he said. He quoted from the September 1996 *Seikyo Times*: "It's not that there are no differences among people. Rather, it's that the Buddha, while fully recognizing people's differences, does not discriminate among them."

The second part of the series, on racial diversity, will take place in April.

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