

Michigan Women's Music Festival ends policy of discrimination against Trans women

After 15 years of controversy, supporters welcome trans women to 'the land'

HART, MICHIGAN - The Michigan Women's Music Festival began admitting openly trans (transgender/transsexual) women last week, bringing success to a longstanding struggle by trans activists both inside and outside the festival.

"Seeing trans women inside the festival for the first time brought me to tears," said Sue Ashman, who attends the festival every year. "It's restored my faith in women's communities." Ashman said "I have friends who have already committed to bringing themselves and others for the first time next year."

Organizers of Camp Trans, the annual protest across the road from the festival, say that every year at least one trans woman at Camp Trans walks to the festival gate with a group of supporters, explains that she is trans, and tries to buy a ticket. In past years, the festival box office has produced a printed copy of the policy and refused.

"This time, the response was, 'cash or credit?'" said Jessica Snodgrass, a Camp Trans organizer and festival attendee who spent the week reaching out to supporters inside the fest. "They said the festival has no policy barring any woman from attending." The woman purchased her ticket on Wednesday and joined supporters inside the festival. Another trans woman, Camp Trans organizer Emilia Lombardi, joined on Friday to facilitate a scheduled workshop discussion on the recently-retired policy.

"This kind of discussion has happened before inside the fest," said Lombardi. "But for the first time in years, trans women were part of the conversation. Over 50 women shared their thoughts about what the inclusion of trans women means for the Festival and how we can move forward. We didn't expect to change anyone's minds in the workshop - but in the end we didn't need to. The support we found was overwhelming."

Both trans women say they were moved by how friendly and supportive other festival attendees were. "We spent all day inside the festival, talking with other women about how Michigan has grown to embrace the diversity of women's experience," Lombardi said. "The attitudes of festival goers have definitely shifted since the early 90's."

With their original mission accomplished, organizers say Camp Trans will continue to be a place for trans people and allies to build community, share ideas, and develop strategies for change. And they will keep working together with festival workers and attendees to make sure trans women who attend the fest next year have support and resources. Camp Trans will partner with a group of supporters inside the fest next year to establish an anti-transphobia area within the festival. Representatives from Camp Trans and a group of festival workers and attendees, organizing under the name "The Yellow Armbands," plan to educate people on trans issues and provide support to trans and differently gendered women. Festival attendees have worn yellow armbands for the past three years as a symbol of pro-trans inclusion solidarity. Both Camp Trans and supporters at the fest say they are excited to be working together to welcome trans women and support a trans-inclusive, women-

only space. "This is not about winning," said Snodgrass. "It's about making our communities whole again. The policy divided people against each other who could be fighting on the same side. We want to be part of the healing process."

Camp Trans <http://www.camp-trans.org/> is an effort to end discrimination against trans women within women's communities. For 14 years, Camp Trans has been a site for trans people and allies to protest the policy, build community, and develop strategies for change.

BACKGROUND

The festival's policy against trans women was first enforced in 1991, when festival security ejected Nancy Burkholder from the grounds of the festival. As the largest women-only festival of its kind, and as one of the few remaining women's events to openly discriminate against trans women, the festival was well known for its policy, drawing criticism from trans activists and festival attendees. Two years ago, a group of attendees deployed a 25-foot banner opposing the policy during the headline act.