

*\* Just a quick note on pronouns and terminology: I will be examining the experiences of gender non-conforming individuals, including those who identified at that time as cross-dressers, female impersonators, transvestites, and transsexuals. It is not always clear which pronouns they preferred, so I do my best to use the right ones, and when unsure I try to use their preferred name. I apologize if I unintentionally misgender someone.*

Between the late-1980s and 1990, the pages of gay newsletter *The Works* (later called the *New Works News*) teemed with news stories and impassioned editorials about instances of discrimination against gender non-conforming individuals. This conflict belied the struggle for belonging and safety within a marginalized community. I will examine the nuances and origins of this, as well as strategies that helped facilitate reconciliation and acceptance. This struggle for acceptance remains critical, as authors of a 2020 study published in the journal of *Psychology and Sexuality* contended that exclusion within the community “exacerbates the White, cisgender, patriarchy of the larger LGBTQ+ community and further erodes progress towards integration as a unified, collective group.” The current threat to queer Americans presents an opportunity to ensure that those in the gender minority are included in efforts for equal rights, including protective legislation.

Here, I will briefly summarize Indianapolis’s *documented* queer history and then gender non-conforming individuals’ place within or outside of it. Like the State of Indiana, Indianapolis in the post-Stonewall era remained conservative in terms of visibility and civil rights of LGBTQ individuals. The state’s first Pride Week took place privately at Sugar Creek Park in 1976, hosted by the Metropolitan Community Church and Gay Peoples Union in Indianapolis.

The following year, evangelical pop singer and anti-gay rights crusader Anita Bryant performed at the “Rally for Decency” at the State Fairgrounds. Her presence drew hundreds of queer protesters and allies, and her vitriol inspired some Hoosiers to come out about their sexual orientation in order to challenge harmful stereotypes and spur public discussions about homosexuality. Despite this demonstration, queer Hoosiers socialized privately until 1984. That summer—following police surveillance of cruising sites, harassment at safe spaces, and prejudiced police work related to increasing homicides of gay men—they gathered at Monument Circle, the heart of Indianapolis. While organizers were careful to note that this was *not* a protest or demonstration, it *was* the first large public gathering of queer individuals in the state. On the Circle, gatherers socialized, listened to local activists, learned about their rights, and registered to vote.

Despite the empowering events of that summer, dubbed “Gay Knights on the Circle,” Pride celebrations remained private until 1990. That year, activists and organizations like Justice, Inc. planned Indiana’s first large outdoor Pride celebration. Those who turned out for the unprecedented event on Monument Circle enjoyed entertainment like drag shows, learned

about gay rights legislation, listened to AIDS activists, and interacted with those manning booths for the Indiana Youth Group and Act-Up Indy. While the Indiana Crossdresser Society (IXE) did have a booth at the 1990 celebration, it is unclear if gender non-conforming people were included at Pride events in years past.

*The Works* newsletter, however, provides some insight into the early activities of “female impersonators” in predominantly-white areas of Indianapolis, noting that they performed at bars along Virginia Avenue from the early 1900s until World War II. Articles in 1982 remarked on the resurgence in popularity of impersonators in the Midwest, noting that the “craze” inspired Indy’s Alley Cat Lounge and Disco to host weekly shows. Articles and editorials in the late-1980s, however, reported on the queer community’s gatekeeping of gender non-conforming or gender-questioning individuals, of whom an estimated 20,000 lived in Indianapolis.

The minimization and exclusion of queer individuals *by* the LGBTQ community would be the cornerstone of a controversy that played out not only in the pages of *The Works*, but at local gay bars in 1989. In February, Kerry Gean, dressed as the “woman I am deep inside of my biological male self,” and friends went to the Varsity Lounge. After they were seated, their server singled out Gean with a request for identification. The server then informed her that she was breaking the law because the photo on her I.D. did not identically match her face. Humiliated and hurt, she returned home, changed into “male” clothes, and upon return was immediately served. After Gean’s experience, she asked readers in an editorial for *The New Works News* “Are we now turning against ourselves? Can we forget what it feels like to be barred from a public place by the owner, or even a bartender, who has some reason to hate us for the hard but true choices we have made?”

By June, things were no better for Roberta Alyson, described by *The Works* as a “pre-operative transsexual.” Alyson was denied entrance to the gay bar Our Place on the grounds of not meeting dress code and identification not matching Alyson’s face, despite having a doctor’s note confirming the necessity of dressing as a woman. Bar officials got an off-duty officer who worked security to check the 31-year-old’s ID. He crumpled up the doctor’s note and Alyson “regrettably began to panic,” walking away from the parking lot. When the officer pursued and arrested Alyson, who later said one of the back-up officers was abusive and tried to lift Alyson’s skirt, Alyson was charged with and fined for fleeing an officer.

Alyson addressed the implications of such discrimination in a letter to the editor of *The New Works News*, noting Our Place’s dress code “flies in the face of the [Stonewall Riots](#) and sends a terrifyingly repressive message to the ‘straight’ community.” Alyson noted, “There were ‘genetic females’ in the bar on the night I visited . . . Am I somehow more of a ‘threat’ to the bar’s image than a woman born?” “We, the greater gay community, are seeing a disturbing trend in that ‘gay rights’ seem only to apply to gays and lesbians who ‘fit in.’”

One outlet of support for Alyson was the Indiana Crossdresser Society, or IXE. A feature in the *Indianapolis Star*, provides a window into the organization's members and activities. In 1989, IXE had over 100 members, who resided in the tri-state area, which included Ohio and Kentucky. Most members were reportedly heterosexual men experiencing "gender conflict," and came from a variety of professions, including carpentry, business, and law enforcement. Once a month, about thirty members socialized at a Westside apartment clubhouse, many bringing their spouses. At one meeting, cosmologists gave members make up tips. At another, police officers advised them on how to avoid a "scene" in public.

The *Star* feature also noted that gay bars were crucial for IXE members not only because the venues shielded them from disapproving coworkers and family members, but because they provided "a place where men won't try to pick them up." These welcoming spaces dwindled when the 21 Club and G.G.'s closed, which according to the *New Works News*, prompted an influx of gender non-conforming patrons to other local gay bars. Some bar owners responded by implementing exclusionary policies, perhaps reflecting the assertion of trans activist Evan Greer in her 2018 piece for *The Washington Post*, that "the predominantly white, cis, gay, male leadership saw trans people as a threat to their slowly but surely growing social and economic power." Perhaps these discriminatory measures were an attempt to safeguard this hard-fought increase in social "legitimacy" and to achieve what scholar Naveed Jazayeri called "self-empowerment and identity legitimization."

Perhaps ironically, it was a female police officer and community liaison who facilitated a meeting to try to resolve issues between "certain segments of the gay community." In July, bar owners, members of the Indiana Civil Liberties Union, Justice, Inc., IPD vice officers, and members of IXE attended the meeting facilitated by Officer Shirley Purvitis, which was, "as expected, confrontational from beginning to end."

Some owners claimed that they implemented policies like denying entrance to those whose photo I.D.s did not reflect their apparent gender, because they feared breaking excise laws. Responding to these concerns, Excise Chief Okey reassured that "the only requirement that excise has for a person being served alcohol is that they be 21 years of age or older. . . . crossdressing, either male or female, is not grounds for refusal of service." Other bar owners, like Our Place's David Morse, stated blatantly that they refused to admit these patrons because they intended to "'preserve the established atmosphere of their bars.'" A 501 Tavern spokesperson stated that these individuals "'were not wanted there,' and if they had been admitted violence might have resulted. The bar owners also voiced the fear that if they admitted people in drag their regular patrons might leave."

Gay TV producer Gregory McDaniel denounced this reasoning, stating, "'What I'm hearing now is exactly what I heard 20 years ago when attempts were being made to keep blacks out of Riverside Park.'" Aside from being morally wrong, McDaniel alleged this discrimination halted momentum in the broader fight for gay equality, noting, "The wire services have picked up

these stories. This shows the dominate [sic] society that we are not unified and that they are safe in oppressing us.”

*Works* writer Ernie Rumbarger came away from the meeting with a greater understanding of those excluded. Prior to attending the meeting, he mused, “did they eat their young?” “Did they have two heads?” “We were very surprised and pleased to find that they were simply a group of very relaxed and congenial people who were ‘doing their own thing.’” “These men quite simply looked and acted like women.” He added that he could not fathom how any establishment would “object to their presence” and urged that “Greater knowledge and understanding is needed (and quickly) in the gay community regarding the wide diversity of groups that make” it up.

While the initial meeting spurred greater understanding among certain individuals, it failed to resolve turmoil within the broader community or result in specific policy reform, as evidenced by Dee Gordon’s editorial complaining about not wanting to socialize with “men in dresses, wigs, and beating mixed gender pronouns to death.” Gordon noted that people want to socialize with whom they felt most comfortable, as they could not be themselves at home or at work, reflecting the complexities of negotiating space in a queer-phobic world. The response of Stan Berg, *Works* publisher and owner of the Body Works bath house, to Gordon’s editorial reflected the potential for growth and reconciliation within the LGBTQ community. Berg wrote that Gordon’s editorial articulated the

*“feelings and actions of another owner of a gay business who, at one time, and for many years, kept out drags. Now, whether old age, an increasing tolerance for gays of all persuasions, or just the realization that bigotry was wrong, actually changed this business owner’s mind, I can’t tell you. But, that business owner is me. The bottom line is that your arguments are bigoted bullshit. My own reasons for keeping drags out of THE WORKS for seven years were also bigoted bullshit.”*

McDaniel praised such pieces published in the *Work’s*, stating that it “goes to show that our community can be introspective and self-correcting.” The increase in media attention began to have a positive effect, as IXE members reported in September that they encountered less hostility at local establishments. Although bars like The Varsity maintained stringent policies, Tomorrow’s was much more welcoming. And while Jimmy’s did not reverse its I.D. policy, employees were more lenient about its enforcement. Roberta Alyson patronized the bar with another friend, who was also dressed in “female attire.” When the server approached, this friend instinctively searched their purse for identification, to which their server said “Don’t worry about that, honey, we don’t do that kind of discriminating here.” The *Works* noted that this action “on the part of Jimmy’s shows that people can change their mind” and should be commended for doing so.

At the request of IXE, Justice, Inc. hosted a workshop in September. This second workshop about discrimination provided a forum to discuss injustices experienced by various groups within the community. Scheduled for two hours, the meeting approached five, as many voiced their anguish about discrimination within the lesbian community, against those Persons with AIDS, and that perpetuated along racial lines. At the center of the meeting, however, remained the exclusion of gender non-conforming individuals. IXE vice president Sharon Allan detailed the trials, noting that they “are currently experiencing problems which the gay community faced years ago” (and undoubtedly *still* are). Although Our Place owner David Morse was the only person to represent a bar in attendance, he noted that he “learned many lessons” from the ensuing discussions and explained to attendees that he had felt “very much trapped in the middle” and tried to reconcile the needs of both parties, “perhaps naively” through a dress code and I.D. policy.

In October, progress continued to be made incrementally. Sharon Allan reported meeting with the manager of Brother’s, Michael David, who was adamant that their policy did not discriminate. When Sharon informed him that the four times Sharon had visited in a tie after work, Sharon had never been i.d.’d, Michael “immediately saw the lack of universality in their policy” and promised to speak with the bar owner at the next staff meeting. While reforms occurred, the impetus for change consistently fell on those who were wronged.

As the 1980s came to a close, the queer community seemed more tolerant—and perhaps welcoming—of gender non-conforming individuals. The *Works* announced in January 1990 the opening of 3535 West, which would “cater to all segments of the gay community,” adding “Now that Indianapolis will finally have a gay meeting place where everyone is welcome, perhaps our gay visitors from out of town who have avoided coming here in recent months because of all the discriminatory nonsense taking place in some of the local bars, will once again return to Indy for a renewal of good times shared in the past.” Additionally, IXE reported that month that 14 new members joined the organization following the *Indianapolis Star’s* recent feature about crossdressers. The feature’s author marveled that not only did she *not* receive vitriolic phone calls from readers, but got calls asking for more information about IXE.

At the historic 1990 Celebration on the Circle Pride event, IXE manned a booth, and an unidentified member mused in the *Works*:

*“We all had lots of fun watching and talking. More often than not ... read the titles of the magazines and books, see the word ‘crossdressing’ and then look up at us and then down at the book and then back at us as a look of surprise and realization passed across their faces... One girl was talking with Emily for five minutes before she looked down and saw the title ‘Understanding the Crossdresser’ and said with utter surprise, ‘Oh, I get it! You’re a guy! That’s cool. You know, I never understood why I can wear anything I want and guys can’t wear skirts.’”*

The exchange demonstrated a willingness to engage and indeed Genny Beemyn contended in “Transgender History of the United States,” that in the early 1990s a “larger rights movement” emerged, one that was “facilitated by the increasing use of the term ‘transgender’ to encompass all individuals whose gender identity or expression differs from the social norms of the gender assigned to them at birth.” Of course, activists continued to fight an uphill battle, as evidenced by the refusal to include the word “transgender” at the 1993 March on Washington. Unfortunately, it is difficult to track the in- or exclusion of gender non-conforming individuals in Indianapolis after January 1991, as *Works* publisher and prolific activist Stan Berg passed away from AIDS that spring. However, Berg and his publication demonstrated the value of forums and facilitators.

Because of entities like The Works, Justice, Inc. and police liaison Shirley Purvitis—who said that “one of the most effective ways to fight discrimination was to ‘shut up and listen to what the other person has to say’”—multiple perspectives were amplified, resulting in greater inclusion. Justice, Inc. concluded that “the parties in this dispute may have been pushed into controversy by events beyond their control,” which made creating space for discussion critical. Providing opportunities for the various parties to explain their rationale ultimately allowed for some degree of resolution.

Regarding the conflict that peaked in 1989, Eric Evans of the Gay Cable Network asserted that “discrimination is usually the result of ignorance,” and emphasized the importance of ongoing education through programming or establishing a Gay Community Center. Thirty-one years later the authors of the 2020 study published in the journal of *Psychology and Sexuality* concluded that such education was still very much necessary after conducting interviews and focus groups with young adults who identified as queer. The 2020 publication noted that “Gender minority participants felt their identities did not have space within the community due to systems within the community that still supported binary gender identities.” The authors advised advocacy groups to facilitate conversations about intersectionality, focusing “on intragroup dialogue.” This would allow individuals to “grapple with privileged aspects of their identities,” specifically male, white, and cisgender privilege. The authors also encouraged these groups to steward “policy initiatives that seek to dismantle the phenomenon of ‘gatekeeping,’” not in order to assimilate the community, but to liberate it.