

Social Change and Justice for All: The Role of SOFFAs in the Trans Community

By Loree Cook-Daniels

It is no secret in the trans community that transphobia can be deadly. We even have websites and an annual Day of Remembrance to help us keep track of who died because of transphobic murderers. The list of names of our dead is long. One of them is Philip DeVine, a young man killed in the home of a friend on December 31, 1993. Oh, wait, he is not on the Remembering Our Dead list.¹ Gee, neither is his host, Lisa Lambert, who was murdered with him. Well, the event was not wholly overlooked: there is Brandon Teena, the third person killed in Lambert's Humboldt, Nebraska, home that night.

We can't expect a list of the dead to include the name of Tanner Lambert, who was "just" orphaned that night by transphobia (the murderers left the baby alive in his crib), but the fact that most trans people who know who Brandon Teena was don't know the names of the others who died with him is not an isolated aberration. It is an example of a pervasive view within the trans community that the only people who face transphobia are trans people themselves. This belief, in turn, leads to policies – both public policies and practices within the trans community itself – that neglect to address and protect what is, arguably, the largest segment of those affected by transphobia: cisgendered SOFFAs.

Although the term SOFFA is often used to refer (only) to the spouses or partners of trans people, in fact, SOFFA encompasses nearly all of the people in our lives: **S**ignificant **O**thers, **F**riends, **F**amily, and **A**llies. Parents, grandparents, children, siblings, roommates, teachers, ministers, physicians, therapists, neighbors, even the grocery store clerk and bank teller...all fall under the SOFFA umbrella. Although some trans people seem to define SOFFAs as "the people who have to learn to accept my gender," SOFFAs are often as affected by transphobia as trans people, yet have even fewer support and policy resources to help them deal with these assaults than do trans people themselves.

In addition to being victims of violence and even murder, known SOFFAs of trans people have been subjected to job loss and employment discrimination, housing discrimination, loss of legal benefits, and health care hassles. For instance, Social Security denied survivors' benefits to one young teenager, ruling that a state law that treats the husband of a mother as the child's legal father did not apply in this teenager's case. Because Social Security had a birth certificate showing his father had been born female and because the FTM had not separately obtained a legal adoption, Social Security ruled the marriage fraudulent and the child fatherless. Other children, partners, and parents of trans people have had their health or mental health care consultations derailed by providers' prejudices, assumptions, or even hostility when routine family history or reproductive health questions revealed the existence of a trans family member. Non-trans researchers and professionals who specialize in transgender issues have also had their careers damaged by transphobia; it is widely known that there are many professionals who serve our community but decline to be listed on resource lists to avoid negative feedback from colleagues or other clients. In addition to facing direct discrimination, SOFFAs are often also victimized whenever a trans person loses a job or is denied the right to marry, adopt, obtain child visitation, access health insurance coverage, etc.

¹ "Remember Our Dead List of Names/Location/Date of Death/Cause of Death," retrieved May 25, 2006, from www.gender.org/remember/day/files/rmbrdead_full.doc.

Perhaps more than they experience outright violence and discrimination, SOFFAs face transphobia in social settings. There are many stories of cisgendered SOFFAs being disowned by their families due to starting or continuing a relationship with a trans person; at least one cisgendered partner is known to have committed suicide when her family disowned her after they learned her partner was trans. More routinely, SOFFAs are subject to curious (sometimes hostile) questioning by everyone down to and including the newspaper carrier. Although these questions and comments are certainly heard by trans people, many SOFFAs report that people who would never dare ask a trans person such intimate questions as what their genitals look like have no such compunctions about asking the partner, child, or parent.

Perhaps the most vulnerable time for SOFFAs is right after the trans person “comes out” as trans. Even when the trans person is doing the “coming out” to others without the partner, parent, or child being present, it is the closest SOFFA that most others turn to for hints on how to react. They want to know: how does this affect YOU? If the closest SOFFAs seem ok with the news, other SOFFAs will often follow their lead. Similarly, if the closest SOFFAs are still struggling with the implications of the news, other SOFFAs will typically become angry at and rejecting of the trans person, as well; this is often when we hear allegations that the trans person is being “selfish” or “uncaring.” Even if the trans person is not actively coming out to people, if she or he is beginning a physical transition, the visible, public nature of that process may prompt people to approach the trans person’s close SOFFAs with questions and concerns. If the primary SOFFAs have not yet had enough time to gather information and work through their own, internal processes of adjusting to the change, these early confrontations may tend to push them into a defensive position that sometimes, in turn, evolves into anger or a decision to distance themselves from the perceived source of the distress, the trans person.

Unfortunately, many of the existing efforts to extend legal protections to trans people do not include SOFFAs who are also at risk. It is not clear if SOFFAs harmed in transphobic violence will be counted in hate crime statistics, or covered by the new trans anti-discrimination laws (some cases have found these kinds of laws also pertain to those who are “associates” of covered classes, but other courts have ruled the opposite). Trans education programs for health care providers and others seldom include SOFFA issues, and some lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) programs have refused to serve non-trans SOFFAs who have been subjected to violence or other discrimination.

Even support programs for transgender people often exclude SOFFAs. Sometimes this exclusion is an oversight or results from the lack of enough of a “critical mass” of SOFFAs to assure a new SOFFA visitor that she or he is welcome in the group. However, many groups explicitly exclude SOFFAs, arguing that trans people need a “safe” place apart from SOFFAs to discuss trans issues. This stance, unfortunately, tends to re-invigorate the myth that holds that “most” trans people lose their families during transition: not only are supportive SOFFAs literally invisible to other trans people, but other SOFFAs who otherwise might be mentored and supported by them are left to flounder on their own. It should surprise no one that people who have no information and support in adjusting to a transition more often abandon their trans loved one than do those who are supported in working through their issues and relationship changes. Nor should we be surprised that trans people who learn about the adjustments SOFFAs have to make from others’ post-adjustment SOFFAs are more successful at supporting and holding onto their own SOFFA circle.

In addition to contributing to the isolation of individual trans people, our community’s failure to routinely include SOFFAs within the community itself and as integral parts of our policy and education efforts weakens our effectiveness. Getting individuals to identify with a group is a powerful way to make them an ally. It is far easier for many cisgendered people to imagine having a trans loved one than it is for them to imagine questioning their own gender identity. Therefore, when we don’t include SOFFAs in our education panels, we lose a key tool for

connecting with our audience. SOFFAs are also sometimes in a better position than trans people themselves to do advocacy; it is the parent of a trans kid who is going to press a school district into admitting a 10-year-old MTF as a girl, not the student herself or the local trans advocacy group. Similarly, it is most likely going to be a SOFFA (often themselves cisgendered) who is going to be the most important advocate for a trans person who is badly injured or dead. SOFFAs are also often the ones telling our stories, spreading knowledge that trans people exist and are beloved members of families and communities; my father-in-law, an extrovert, seems to talk to far more people about his FTM child than my introverted partner and I could ever come out to ourselves.

The solution to the SOFFA problem can be summed up in one word: inclusion. When SOFFA stories are as welcome and heard at trans support group meetings as are trans people's stories, it will become easier for trans people to come out *and* keep their family and friends. When SOFFAs are routinely included on trans public education panels, audiences will begin to feel more connected with our issues. When the stories of discrimination and violence against SOFFAs are told as often as are the stories about discrimination and violence against trans people themselves, more potential allies will understand how transphobia could harm them, too, and be motivated to join our educational and advocacy campaigns.

Here are some of the key resources for and about SOFFAs:

TransFamily - www.transfamily.org

TransFamily is a support group for transgendered and transsexual people, their parents, partners, children, other family members, friends, and supportive others. We provide referrals, literature, and over-the-phone information on all transgender issues. We also sponsor many email listservs for various types of SOFFAs.

Colage - www.colage.org

Despite its name, Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere is extremely trans-friendly and includes many adult and teenage children of trans people.

Straight Spouse Network - <http://www.ssnetwk.org/>

Straight Spouse Network supports non-LGBT spouses of LGBT individuals. SSN offers email listserves, in-person groups, and resources.

PFLAG-TNET - <http://pflag.org/TNET.tnet.0.html>

This is the website for the Transgender Network of PFLAG (Parents, Families & Friends of Lesbians & Gays). The site includes information on trans-inclusive in-person PFLAG chapters and other resources.

"Making Space Safe" - <http://www.forge-forward.org/handouts/MakingSafeSpace.htm>

"Making Space Safe," by Loree Cook-Daniels (2001), is an article that examines methods of designing and running support groups and workshops that are both SOFFA-inclusive and "safe," and discusses why the trans community is harmed when we sponsor separatist groups.

SOFFA Q&A - <http://www.forge-forward.org/handouts/SOFFA-QA.pdf>

“SOFFA Questions and Answers: A FORGE FAQ” handout answers some common questions about SOFFAs. Note that reference links are outdated.

SOFFA Healthcare - <http://www.forge-forward.org/handouts/SOFFA-Healthcare.pdf>

“SOFFAs Interfacing with Health Care Professionals,” michael munson and Loree Cook-Daniels, FORGE (2001). Two articles exploring the ways in which transphobia may affect the health care SOFFAs receive.

Trans Forming Families: Real Stories About Transgender Loved Ones (2nd edition) edited by Mary Boenke, 2003. Available through mainstream bookstores; this book includes essays by 40 SOFFAs and trans individuals.