

## Group Seeks To Find Second Self

### National Organization Provides Support, Inspiration For Area Cross-Dressers

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Jennie, Jamie Renae, Jeannine, Datti and Gerri

A well-dressed group, decked out in heels and sequins, gathered Nov. 6-7 in a Radisson Hotel ballroom in Fayetteville to conclude an annual conference of the national organization Tri-Ess. The event featured a banquet, inspirational speakers and recognition for philanthropic works and distinguished Tri-Ess chapters, which are named with combinations of the Greek alphabet.

If the meeting of Tri-Ess members seemed like a sorority function of sorts, that's because it was. It was not, however, a typical group of "sisters." Tri-Ess is the nickname for the Society for the Second Self -- an educational, social and support group for heterosexual cross dressers and the people they love.

Tri-Ess formed in 1976 from earlier cross dressers' groups and now boasts more than 30 chapters throughout the United States. The Sigma Mu chapter -- formed in the mid 1990s to represent Arkansas, Oklahoma, Kansas and Missouri -- was chosen to host the club's 2004 Spouses' and Partners' International Conference on Education -- or SPICE.

"We thought it would be good to take the event to middle America," said Datti Kapella, a director of events planning for Tri-Ess. More than 50 people from around the country attended SPICE in Fayetteville.

Conference events included opportunity for lighthearted socializing -- such as a day excursion to Eureka Springs -- as well as discussion of more serious topics which affect crossdressers and their spouses. Mostly, it was an opportunity for those who enjoy crossdressing to do so in an accepting and supportive environment.

Tri-Ess members said they are aware cross dressing raises not only eyebrows but a lot of questions for those outside the lifestyle.

"We recognize people think we're different, and most of us, if we have time, do not mind answering a few respectful questions," said Tri-Ess member Jeanine Williams, who, as did the rest of the Tri-Ess members, gave only the name used when dressed as a woman.

One common question for cross dressers is which pronoun to use. Generally, cross dressers -- many of whom seek a balance between their masculinity and femininity, group members said -- prefer to be called "he" when dressed as men and "she" when dressed as women.

Most of the Tri-Ess members in attendance said they prefer to use women's bathrooms. Most states have no laws dictating that restrooms must be segregated by gender, they said. Using a men's bathroom could be dangerous when dressed as a woman, the Tri-Ess members agreed. "You might not walk out alive," one pointed out.



To answer another intriguing question, most married cross dressers do raid their wives' closets. And "women can be cross dressers, too," Sigma Mu member Jamie Renae pointed out.

The most common question people have, Tri-Ess members agreed, is if cross dressers are also homosexuals. "The answer is 'no!'" the group gathered emphasized.

"About 98 percent of cross dressers, in fact, are straight," Renae estimated.

"And we are NOT drag queens," Tri-Ess member Gerri Buchanan offered, the others nodding in unison. Drag queens are typically homosexual, the group said, and they do what they do for the stage.

"We dress to emulate women," Williams explained. "But our preference is to blend in. We wear everyday makeup, not stage makeup."

"And we're not just Jerry Springer-type people looking for attention," Renae said. "We would love it if we could walk down the street and no one would even notice."

Unless, the group quickly corrected her, "someone notices our outfits!"

While crossdressing is not a mainstream practice, Tri-Ess members point out it's hard to tell how many Americans dress to intentionally resemble the opposite sex.



"Only a very small number of cross dressers would come out in public that way," said Kapella, who offered only the name she uses while cross dressing. "Some men just sit home on Sunday afternoons watching football, slurping a beer, while wearing a dress, and that's as far as they'll ever take it."

Some heterosexuals fear leaving the house cross dressed, Tri-Ess members said, and others just aren't compelled to do so. "Everyone out there knows someone who is a cross dresser," Renae said. "They just aren't aware of it."

"(Cross dressers) come from all walks of life," Kapella added. "Many are represented at this conference."

Indeed, the group gathered for the Saturday banquet included young and old, married and single, and a variety of backgrounds. While Renae admitted, with a laugh, to a childhood interest in "jacks and jump-rope," Kapella said she used to play college football and is just one of many Tri-Ess members with a history in athletics.

All have come to terms with their cross-dressing tendencies at different times and in different ways. "For me, it is just something I've always felt that I needed to do," Renae explained. Living in secrecy "comes with a lot of guilt," she said. "And with guilt comes anger. But when you accept (the desire to cross dress), you are finally at peace with yourself."

"We can finally see what we feel on the inside," Williams said.

Self-acceptance is not always easy, Buchanan pointed out, and neither is asking others to accept cross dressing. Many cross dressers keep their lifestyle a secret, while others are open with spouses, family or friends. For cross dressers themselves, Tri-Ess offers a network of people dealing with such issues. The organization also offers support for loved ones coming to terms with the cross-dressing lifestyle

Jennie Kapella, a pretty, reserved woman, is the wife of Datti Kapella and a Tri-Ess member herself. The couple have been married for 19 years, but Jennie has been aware of Datti's cross dressing for just four years.

"It was very scary," Datti Kapella said of breaking the news to Jennie. "I didn't know how she was going to react. I was pleased and surprised she was accepting."

"I felt he was still the same person I had been married to for 15 years," Jennie Kapella said. She added the news was shocking, and she was initially fearful of other secrets her husband might be keeping. She also wondered if the cross dressing meant he was gay. "But, if you become educated," Jennie Kapella said, "you realize what it is really about. You also realize what took them so long to tell you."

"Cross dressing won't break up a marriage," she added, "unless there are other things wrong. If it is a good relationship, you can survive."