



## **History of the Southern Arizona Gender Alliance, Part I**

Part I: Who, What, When, Where, Why—And What Next?

by Kevin Q. Maxey, MD  
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SAGA was conceived at Wingspan at the January 1998 meeting of the DeZert Boyz peer support group.

That meeting was attended by me and Gery Armsby, the founder of that group, and Debra Hughson, a woman who describes herself as an admirer of FTMs (female-to-male transsexuals). The mission of DeZert Boyz was to be a support group primarily for people born into bodies that were identified as female at birth but who don't feel adequately described as female.

In the course of that meeting, we were reflecting on the lack of any sort of meeting for transfolk of various descriptions to get together for sharing and support and activism. We decided to create such a group, so we picked a meeting time and debated about a name, quickly settling on Southern Arizona Gender Alliance, hoping the group could serve a wider area than just Tucson and be a place where members of any other gender-related groups could come together.

So SAGA had these three founders, two fathers and a mother. I am the only one who is still in Tucson, as Gery moved to New York where he felt he could do more in the way of political activism. Debra finished her post-doctoral work and took a position in San Antonio where she founded a group similar to DeZert Boyz and called it Alamo Boyz. She has since moved to California where she lives in a smallish town and we are waiting to hear if she finds any kindred spirits there.

Perhaps you remember the line, "If we build it, they will come" from the movie, "Field of Dreams." Well, that's what we said about SAGA, and made a casual prediction at our first meeting, attended by the three founders, that within three months we would triple our number. There were nine people at the third meeting. I haven't made any more predictions, but the number has grown until we now have over one hundred forty members. Meeting attendance hovers around twenty to thirty each month for the past several months, not always the same folks. There are usually two to four new people at every SAGA meeting.

I'd like to clarify the relationship between SAGA and the peer support groups. As you can see, SAGA was actually created by Dezert Boyz, not the other way around. SAGA as a group didn't actually create any of the groups; rather, members have taken the responsibility to create groups as the needs became clear. I stepped in as facilitator for the Dezert Boyz group when Geri Armsby moved away. A SAGA member, Brianna Ream, was later responsible for creating Dezert Girlz, which is now facilitated by Ann Lorraine Jones. And similarly, Karla Carr, the wife of the first SAGA president Jamie Carr, took it upon herself to create the Dezert Partnerz group for the non-trans-identified partners of trans-identified persons. Cathy Busha created Gender Outlawz, which is really broad in who it serves and is discussion oriented rather than peer support in nature. Cathy and Lynn Easton collaborated to create the TransYouth group. Samuel Ace saw and heard the need and created the trans-friendly AA-modeled alcohol and substance abuse recovery group called TransFormed. Jamie Carr created the Bible study group for those who had been asked to leave a church because of their trans-identification as well as those who have a desire for Christian fellowship. At our annual planning meetings we review the groups we have available and consider what other needs exist and assess our members for readiness to meet the needs. There has been one request (through a psychologist serving a specific client) for a Spanish speaking group, and there has been contemplation of a group for family members of trans-persons.

The various groups are needed, because while there are many things we have in common in our struggle to feel whole and real in our lives, each segment has its own unique issues as well. Attendance at the peer support groups has been seen to fluctuate from as few as two to as many as thirty at a meeting, but a reasonable average would be 6-12 per meeting. There are often new faces at the peer support meetings.

You could compare this branching out from SAGA with the need for gay men and lesbians to have their separate meetings in addition to broader "queer community" meetings that would include both. For example, within Wingspan and in Tucson there are groups for gay men that focus specifically

on health issues, lesbians who meet to discuss cancer and health, Lesbian Avengers, and men who meet strictly for social purposes. If a community is large enough, it is bound to spawn special interest subgroups. And that's what has happened with SAGA.

SAGA does have an Executive Board, consisting of a President (me), Vice President Erin Russ, Secretary Alison Davison, and Treasurer Mitchell Hunter. We also now have additional Board members, including the leaders of our working groups (committee chairs) Rebecca Abolt from the Operations Committee, Joe Cox from the Social Committee, and Michael Woodward from the Resources Committee. We also include on our board the facilitators of each of the allied gender-related groups, and have currently the interest and involvement of Karla Carr with the Dezert Partnerz group, Jamie Carr with the Transformations Bible study group, Ann Jones from Dezert Girlz, and Samuel Ace from the Transformed recovery group. We are a diverse group, and this is a working board, actively involved in facilitation of allied meetings and participating in the committees and working group that arise from SAGA.

To quote our mission statement: "The Southern Arizona Gender Alliance (SAGA) envisions an America in which transgender people are ensured of their basic rights and can be open, honest, and safe at home, at work, and in the community. SAGA provides a safe and supportive environment for individual gender exploration and expression and for community building. SAGA's mission is to promote and develop educational, political, support, and social programs for all transgender people, their significant others, friends, families, and allies, by collaborating with individuals and organizations."

SAGA meetings are one place where those who are questioning their gender can come and be themselves without fear of ridicule or attack. Those who have worked their way through gender issues can share their wisdom and experience. Members are invited to dress as they please, though the need for safety on the street is stressed and the large restrooms at Wingspan may be used as change-rooms before and after meetings. All general meetings are open to friends and family who may have questions of their own about how to cope with the many issues they face in their relationships with a transgender loved one. And we are open to anyone who is respectfully seeking information and enlightenment about gender issues in general or transition issues in particular.

We are working on outreach and education for the public, for the GLBT community, and for service providers in Arizona by providing speakers for classes at the UA and Pima College and other institutions of learning,

offering information booths at festivals and other GLBT events, providing speakers panel for workshops and forums, attending conferences and workshops to raise the issue of trans-identity and rights, working with local attorneys to educate more members of the judicial system about our issues, and by involving ourselves in a wide variety of community organizations. As of July 2001 we have available the printed Southern Arizona Gender Alliance Resource & Services Guide which we plan to make available as a self-supporting (through advertising) and annually updated resource guide. In 2001, our members produced a "starter kit" entitled "Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Transgender But Were Afraid To Ask" which includes brief essential information about Transgenderism and Transsexualism, and we expect this packet will be expanded considerably during 2002. We have had a very successful speakers' bureau, managed by Jamie Carr. We anticipate in the coming year we will be actively marketing the services of the bureau thanks to funding from our most recent grant. We also provide ongoing information via personal contacts and printed information kept in two large binders in the transgender section of the Wingspan library. We want our information to be easily accessible and widely shared. And we are constantly on the lookout for new information, researching and adding what we find as particular questions or issues arise.

Farther into the future we hope to see a society like that described in the mission statement. Getting there will require some increase in our political awareness and involvement. Already members of SAGA have added their energy to Tucson's GLBT Commission and its subcommittees, lobbied legislators in Phoenix and in Washington. DC, and worked with and supported the Arizona Human Rights Fund. Some of us had to fight local battles in our workplace over our right to work without being harassed, or regarding such personal issues as which bathroom we will be allowed to use. Some of us have had to write letters to insurance companies which not only exclude specific treatment relating to gender reassignment but sometimes refuse to insure us at all. Some have struggled with the Motor Vehicle Division regarding unnecessary problems with name and gender change on the driver's license, even when the applicant had with them a court order signed by a judge granting the name and gender change. It is almost impossible to live the life of a transsexual without engaging in some work of a political nature, and it is a lot of energy required from folks who are already having to surmount many obstacles to living their own private lives. The sharing of information from battles fought and won can pave the way for others, leaving them with energy to contribute to the larger battles.

# History of the Southern Arizona Gender Alliance, Part II

## Part II: Growth and Expansion

By C. Michael Woodward

“If you build it, they will come”. That’s what was said about SAGA. Kevin made a casual prediction at the first meeting, attended by the three founders, that within three months the number would triple. There were nine people at the third meeting.

The numbers continue to grow—as of June 2005, we have more than 200 members on our mailing list. Meeting attendance hovers around 20-30 each month, and it’s rarely the same group of folks. There are, in fact, usually two to four new people at every SAGA meeting.

### United by Tragedy

In the fall of 2002, the Tucson transgender community experienced the tragic death by suicide of one of its most visible and outspoken leaders. Alexander John Goodrum was the founder and director of TGNet Arizona, another Tucson-based transgender advocacy organization.

This experience served to further unite and strengthen our Board and members’ commitment to the community. In January 2003, SAGA and TGNet Arizona officially merged. All programs and projects of TGNet Arizona are now under the SAGA umbrella, including the nationally recognized Arizona Transgender Workplace Project (ATWORK), a ground-breaking employer outreach and education program conceived by Goodrum.

### Fueled by Personal Passion

SAGA’s diverse groups and projects are needed because, while there are many things we have in common in our struggle to feel whole and real in our lives, each segment has its own unique issues as well. You could compare this branching out from SAGA to the need for gay men and lesbians to have their separate meetings in addition to broader “queer community” meetings that would include both. For example, in Tucson there are lesbians who meet to discuss cancer and health, gay parents, the politically active Stonewall Democrats, queer youth, and men who meet strictly for social purposes... just to name a few.

Although our number of active allies is growing quickly, most of the volunteers involved in developing SAGA projects are themselves transgender or gender-variant. Thus, those executing the activities are also those receiving the services. Because our primary programs were developed based on the needs and passions of individual members, we have been very successful at creating unique solutions. Both the ATWORK Project and the Goodrum Project are original, innovative programs that we believe to be the first of their kind anywhere. Content from the ATWORK Project has already been adopted by national organizations such as Out & Equal Workplace Advocates, the Gender Public Advocacy Coalition (GPAC), and others. We anticipate similar requests from the community when the Goodrum Project is fully implemented.

As of this writing (June 2005), we have successfully raised more than \$80,000 in grants since our founding, as well as several thousands of dollars in individual and in-kind donations. Past and current SAGA and/or TGNet Arizona funders include the Funding Exchange; the Heller-Barnard Fund; the Gill Foundation; the Amazon Foundation; the Kenton Civil Rights Fund, the LBTS Alliance Fund, and the general fund of the Community Foundation for Southern Arizona; the Women's Foundation of Southern Arizona; local businesses; and individual donors.

SAGA has recently proposed a merge of our organization with Wingspan, our fiscal sponsor. We are currently in negotiations to make that happen, and we look forward to the unlimited opportunities that lie ahead. Details when available.