

SCC 2006

Lunchtime Featured Speaker - Donna Rose

September 22, 2006

[Introduction]

Donna:

I just want to thank you for having me here today. It amazes me to have the opportunity to speak with all of you here today.

I speak a lot. I'm invited to talk at functions all over the country and I think it's more because there aren't enough of us to speak about ourselves than anything about me in particular. So there's a relatively small group of us to choose from.

It's different coming and speaking to *us*, because the people in this room know about the things that I'm going to talk about because you *feel* them. This is a shared experience that we uniquely can identify with. So many times I'm invited to speak and it's to people who have no clue as to what it's like to become truly authentic, or to be more than you seem to be because, frankly, we live in a world where being ordinary is okay. But the people in this room and the people who are part of our community are *more* than ordinary. They're **extraordinary**.

When I listened to Kristin introduce me as "remarkable" I just want to say that if my overall message means anything, it's that ordinary people can do extraordinary things. That is the message. Most of us are so complicated in that we have so many roles in our lives: we're parents, we're husbands and wives, we have a career, we have hobbies and passions. We have things that really are important to us. But the fact that we're here – that we share an unspoken *something* - is a common thread that stretches between all of us. With that in mind, I'd like to highlight a few things that I think are really important to talk about today.

Now, let me take a quick survey. How many people are here at Southern Comfort for the first time? I'm curious.

[Many people raise their hands]

Wow! Look at these people. Let's give them some applause! [Applause]

That's amazing. When you see these people throughout the conference go to them and welcome them because the sisterhood and the brotherhood embodied by this conference is something that can last you a lifetime.

Yesterday when I registered the first question was: How many of these have you been to? I had to think back...one, two, three, four, five. I've been to five, which amazes me. And, the reason I come back year after year is because the energy and the hope that it provides each and every year makes me keep *wanting* to come back.

The friends that I make here are more than just skin-deep. These are core-deep friends...friends that you don't mind crying in front of, friends that you would die for. I don't know about you but there was a time in my life when I could have counted those kinds of friends on one hand. I doubt I was even capable of that kind of selfless friendship – there were too many walls in the way. Being able to give of yourself is a special thing and it doesn't come easily for many of us so please, welcome our newcomers throughout the weekend.

As I thought about what I wanted to share today and how to frame it, part of what came to my mind has to do with words. We use words as a communication tool but I think part of the problem that we face as a community has to do with words. That is, in some cases we don't have enough words, but more often than not we simply don't have the *right* words. Why? Because our shared experience - the things that we're trying to communicate - transcend words. How do you communicate what a rose smells like? How do you communicate the frustration and the shame of living a lie? How can you explain an unexplainable force that won't go away, or what it feels like to risk everything you know and love by coming out to your son, or your daughter, or your husband, or your wife? Other than terror, or sadness, or exhilaration – are there words that really work? I don't think so. Words fail us.

So, I think part of the problem is that we, as a community, find ourselves transcending words. We *have to* transcend words. We have to be able to communicate our lives – not necessarily through words, but we have to *show* people who and what we are. I think THAT is the reason that we're being as successful as we are in the incredible struggle that we're all fighting simply by being ourselves out there in the world. It's because by meeting us, and by seeing us, and by *feeling* us as people – as unique, authentic people – we each carry the message to the people in our lives as to who and what we are. They don't have to listen to words that ultimately fall short of being able to explain, because they can *feel* it. That is the single most significant thing that each and every one of us here does and needs to do as it moves us *all* forward.

It's really important to understand that the people here don't have to live in a world where you feel that it's necessary to conform to a label. *Any* label. We live in a binary world of man/woman, boy/girl, yes/no, good/bad, gay or lesbian/heterosexual. It's funny – people sometimes ask me if I'm interested in men or women and I'll always tell them that men are generally my third choice. That's just the way it is! They ask me questions that they think require a simple yes or no answer but the reality is that life isn't that simple.

“Are you a lesbian?” Well, you know that sort of depends on your point of view...I think we need to talk. Because my world isn't so simple as that. I don't feel the need to conform to what society expects from being a woman and the fact that I participate in the Gay Games this past summer was more about being involved in something special than it had to do with anything athletic. Because 47 year old people getting beat up by young kids is not a pretty thing.

A couple of interesting things that I did learn, though, are that a) wrestling is far more difficult with boobs than without them. I learned that the hard way. I got bruises on my boobs. And, the second is that leverage is a far more important thing when you're older

and the strength is gone – when you can't overcome a lack of good technique with brute force any more. That's sort of a metaphor for life in general, I think, in that you can't necessarily make things happen because you're strong or you're loud or you're angry any more. You have to have substance. There has to be more than the fact that you're the angriest person in the room. In case you haven't noticed, we've got a lot of anger in our community. Part of what this discussion is about is finding ways to focus it in productive and healthy ways rather than destructive and ultimately dangerous ones. Each of us has our own crosses to bear so finding ways to focus that passion, and that anger, and that frustration is just such an important component - it's a fuel that we need to help us to be ourselves and to earn the rights that we deserve in the workplace, in broader society, and in our minds.

Now, the word "transgender" I find to be kind of an odd word because it implies that what we are, or that this unique community that we find ourselves part of, is just about gender. It's not. It needs to be mentioned that we didn't *choose* to be part of this community. This community chose us. We didn't get to choose that we were labeled as a boy or a girl when we were born and we didn't get to choose the fact that we're unique or "gifted" in terms of how we feel about that. I'm going to come back to that here in a couple of minutes.

To be transgender, to me, is more about honesty and integrity and authenticity than it is about anything having to do with gender. It has to do with being yourself, and the fact that your journey to your own sense of happiness and fulfillment outwardly expresses itself AS gender doesn't diminish it in any way. The fact that it provides an opportunity to be who you are to people who accept you as you are – THAT is what's at the heart of being transgender. Freedom. Acceptance. THAT'S transgender to *me*.

And so, when I see people who distance themselves, who say, "Well I used to be transgender but now I'm a woman" – and you hear it all the time – says to me that we have people in our community who really haven't come to a sense of acceptance of themselves yet. And, if you can't accept yourself – if you can't come to peace with yourself – then how the heck can we expect the rest of society to come to peace with us as well?

It's that sense of peace that you have when you go out into the world to be yourself – it doesn't matter where you are or what you're doing – knowing that nobody can take your dignity from you. Nobody can take your integrity from you unless you give it away so the people in *my* community hold their heads high when they go into a room. It doesn't matter what other people are thinking. Their honesty, their openness, their willingness to share, those are the things that make them different. NOT their sense of their gender.

That's the thing that other people just don't get because in an ordinary world people are afraid. People....are....*afraid*. We live in a society that – at this point in time – is built on fear. I was watching the news this morning and they were talking about torture. They were discussing what is "acceptable" torture, which blows me away – that we live under a government that somehow can rationalize or justify horrible, inhuman treatment of other people. And then we wonder why people are flying airplanes into buildings. It just blows me away that people can't see the connection between treating people

humanely and caring about their issues or what makes them unique, and the way that people are being treated in this country right now.

One of the things that really affected me happened last year. In southern Arizona there was a young gay man. His name was Amancio Corrales and he was 20 years old – a young man. He was a cosmetologist, got harassed a lot in school by bullies but it didn't jade him – he was vibrant and full of life, I mean, just an amazing young guy.

To make money he entertained at some of the drag clubs down in Southern Arizona up through Phoenix, and it's very dusty territory. I mean, you haven't lived until you've been down in Yuma, Arizona. His stage name was Delilah.

He went out on a Saturday night last April with some friends, dressed in drag, because he was beautiful. I mean, he was beautiful – no matter how he presented himself – he...was...beautiful.

They found his body floating in the Colorado River the next morning. He had been beaten, and his body had been mutilated. And, as so often happens when these things happen *to us*, nothing happened. No arrests. Very little investigation. It was almost as if this life, this young vibrant life, was a *disposable* life.

And, so a few weeks after this tragedy happened they invited several of us to Yuma to participate in a vigil to try to bring awareness that this had happened, and that nothing was happening. And I'll tell you now, that this inner spark that gives you courage, that needs regenerating from time to time – when it sees things, it tells you why you're here. What your purpose is.

So, we went to this vigil and Amancio's mother was there. I spoke at this event, and when it was over Amancio's mom – she was sobbing – she came to me and she hugged me and her body was heaving from the sobs – and she lifted her head and looked at me with tears running down her face and she said, "Why? Why did they take my baby? They took him from me and I don't know why." And, I couldn't give her a reason why. I couldn't rationalize that there was some big master plan somewhere – that he was better off in heaven than he was here, with his family, living out his life. Instead, his life was brutally *taken* by someone who hated, and who misunderstood, and who felt empowered to do that to Amancio.

Now, when you look into someone's eyes like that, it will change you. I tell you now – it will change you. And you realize that you can't be quiet. That the pride that you feel in being yourself, in being who you are and in our people – the only thing that you have to do is to be yourself because the goal of these people is to make you quiet. But, you CAN'T be quiet. We CANNOT be quiet. We cannot forget. Because, if we forget then Amancio, and other innocent victims like him, he will have died in vain. And that would be an even bigger tragedy.

Often times, I find the biggest enemy isn't "them" out there. For far too many of us, it's us in here. [pointing to head]. That's the problem. Sometimes, you can deal with the world but you can't deal with your head. That's such a hard opponent to overcome sometimes. I've got friends who have transitioned who are well on their way to living

what other people would perceive to be a great life, but they still haven't come to terms with their trans-ness (for lack of a better term).

I have one friend who was just at the beginning of her transition – she called me up and she said to me, “I can't wait until all of this is over.” To which I reply, “What do you think is going to be over? I don't know what you're saying.” She said, “Well, I just can't wait until I don't feel so *different*.” To which I replied, “Honey, I think the thing that you're going to learn over time, is that being different isn't a bad thing. In fact, I think you'll eventually come to appreciate the fact that you *are* different.” And that, to me, is a far more difficult journey than it is to become a man or a woman or anything in between. Because coming to an acceptance of being unique in a world that doesn't really like unique all that much is truly a hero's journey.

So, each of us in here today, I think, needs to celebrate our unique-ness and our difference. We are all different, and I find beauty in our difference.

At the same time there are ways in which we're far more alike than we are different – deep down inside. We've all had different experiences. We've all followed different paths in life – some of which we've chosen and some of which we haven't. But my dad used to tell me that your life is 10% what happens to you and 90% of how you deal with it. You don't have the chance to choose the first 10 percent but you damn well have the chance to choose the 90 percent. And so, at the end of the day, when you have to come to peace with the maker, however you believe that maker to be, you'll need to look back over your life and say, “I lived my life. I was true to myself. I don't have any regrets. And I'm happy for being here in the world- it's better off for me having been here than not.” And if you can't say that, if you can't say that today then I suggest that each of us needs to take a really close look at why we're here. Because that, to me, is the meaning of life. Life is here to live it and to be *real*, as opposed to enduring it and waiting until it's passed before we can do anything about it. That's a really important message to take away.

Graucho Marx once said, “I'd never join a club that would have someone like me as a member.” That's how I used to feel about the transgender community, because I'd never met one of us. I'd never met another transgender person. In fact, Monica Helms is here. Monica was part of my earliest days, in Phoenix, and was one of the first one of us that I'd ever met. I had never known *us* as a community.

Speaking of words, that word - *community* - is a very important word. So many of us can remember what it was like to grow up alone, thinking that you're the only one. When there was no internet, there were no chat rooms, there were no books. We were utterly and totally alone.

My dad was a professor and I'd go into the campus library and all I could find was text books - clinical, cold textbooks that had nothing to do with real life. They couldn't tell me that people who were transgender – the word didn't even exist – had any opportunity to lead happy fulfilling lives. There were no role models. There were no people out there that I could identify with to help me come to some level of understanding that if you're going to ask me to risk everything that I've ever wanted or been in hopes of attaining something that I can't even explain then I need that magical

ingredient that helps you jump from A to Z. That ingredient is *Hope*. There was no hope because each of us had to deal with this by ourselves.

So, there was no community. The people who successfully dealt with their issues were only the ones who could fade away, or who could hide it well. Because, being transgender in the workplace, or being transgender in society for far too many of us was ultimately a death sentence. We take things for granted today in this country. No matter how bad we think it is, the fact of the matter is that we are far better off as a community - and safer - thanks to the work that people here in our community are doing and that our allies are doing for us and with us.

Look around you. You are *not* alone any more. You have a community here. You have brothers and sisters who care. You belong, you are valued, you are respected, and you are loved. To me – *that's* community.

The biggest change, in my opinion, has been the development of this sense of community, and this awareness of the many communities that make up the transgender community. I don't see us as being just one community – I see us as a community of communities because we are so broad, and we're so diverse, that we don't fall into neat little buckets. We have people on one end of the spectrum who accept the gender binary and are willing to change themselves to be able to fit into it, so that their body finally feels comfortable around their soul. And, at the other end we have people who will say to you, "I don't buy into gender as a construct." Two fundamentally polar opposites. Yet, we're all lumped together in this huge community of *transgender*.

Still, the irony is – we belong together. If nobody watches out for *all* of us, then nobody will watch out for *any* of us. And we, the people in this room, are the people who need to see the bigger picture. We are the sentinels who have to stand up and say, "No, this isn't just about gender. It's about my right to be who and what I am." That's the message that resonates with people. Because when you're speaking to a room full of people who have no clue as to what it might be like to be uncomfortable in their skin. They have no clue as to what it might be like to have to hide something to the point where you want to explode. They have no clue as to how difficult it is to reconcile the fact that the person on the inside knows that the person on the outside is a pretender. And so, when you speak to them about being authentic and about community and about the fact that our right to be ourselves is no threat to their right to be themselves – that message resonates.

I remember a time when I thought people like me would be relegated to shopping at 3 in the morning because we didn't want anyone to see us. That's why I never saw a transgender person – because we only came out at night. Really, though, nobody wants to be considered a freak, and when you hear someone laughing three aisles over – you know they're laughing at you. You're sure of it. And, it hurts. It hurts.

But, the fact of the matter is that I didn't go through all of this to live in a cave. I didn't do this to let other people's insecurities tell me what to be, or what not to be. Because, if we allow that to happen – if any of us allow ourselves or our lives to be directed by other people's fears and insecurities – I'll tell you now, that we'll get to that point when

our Maker is there knocking at our door and we're going to have nothing to say. We're going to have *nothing* to say.

I want to talk for a minute about how our lives are changing because it's really extraordinary in some very important ways. When I think about how I got involved in all of the things that I'm involved in I still look back and say, "What the heck!! How did this happen??" My sister said I've become a "victim of my own competence", which is a kind way of saying that I just didn't say "no" at the right times. I like that.

I'm very passionate, I love our community, and I love our people. I love meeting people, and looking them in the eyes and embracing them because then it's not some abstract thing any more. It's personal, and we have to keep it personal. Because, if we don't keep it personal – if we don't share these unique things among ourselves then how do we expect it to grow?

Courage is contagious – never forget that. Courage is contagious and the people in this room - although we're all different – one thing that we all share simply by being here is courage. All too often we dismiss it, as a community, saying "Well, I don't see it as being courageous – I did what I had to do." But, we need to look at ourselves sometimes through the eyes with which we're being perceived. Courage is courage, and I think we need to hug each other and love each other for the courage it takes to stand up, to be here, and to be part of something as special and wonderful as this. Courage is actually a rare quality and it's important that we see it in ourselves.

These things take time. There are people in our community who want things to happen overnight but *none* of this happens overnight. Actually, it amazes me that things are happening as quickly as they are. I sometimes wonder if we're ready for it. In workplaces, and in culture – this past year has been amazing. There's no other word to use.

When you look at what "TransAmerica" did to humanize ourselves in popular culture. When you look at "Transgenerations". When you look at the opportunities that we're having in mainstream media to be portrayed as *people* instead of as victims, or as sociopaths. We're finally turning a corner by getting past so many of those stereotypes but the problem between our ears – the one I was talking about – too many of us are still stuck in that. Too many of us are still buying into the notion that we're broken somehow.

There was a time when I'd try to explain to people that I am the way I am because of a "birth defect". I was born this way – I didn't choose it any more than someone who is born with a cleft palate chooses that. I was just born this way.

Getting back to the discussion about words – I will not in any way, shape or form acknowledge that what has happened in my life is a "defect". That, to me, would be to buy into the lie that something is wrong or something is bad, because it pathologizes us. We see these words used to describe us over and over again. Disorder is one. It's *not* a disorder. This is a part of me that is actually my favorite part of me and I can't for the life of me imagine how others can put a label on it that somehow implies that it's inherently sick or bad or immoral. That's just wrong and it's wrong and it's wrong.

I'm preaching to the choir here. As I say, it's easy to nod in agreement because we all feel it. We all *know* it. But we have to do more than nod. We have to know it. It's like The Matrix – nobody can tell you what the Matrix is, we have to *show* you. That's what this is, because there are far too many of us that still buy into the Great Lie. That somehow still have difficulty accepting who they are, how they are, why they are. To me, that's the journey. Life is a journey. It's there to be lived and the key ingredient to all of it is time.

Time is so, so important. I see many who seem to be rushing through their transition as though they're trying to get some surgery before they change their mind. It blows me away to think that a little piece of skin between your legs is going to define you or is going to *fix* you. That's another one of these great lies. It doesn't. That's one of the reasons that it's so difficult for many of us, as we come to *know* that we're *more* than simply a patch of skin that we have (or don't) between our legs.

Time is not our enemy. Time is our friend. We have to understand that coming to know yourself and coming to accept yourself is a maturity process. It takes time for flowers to bloom and it takes time for *people* to bloom. Some of us just haven't bloomed yet. Know this, though – your time is coming.

The reason that we're going to eventually gain the rights that so many people take for granted is the fact that a) we are right and b) time is on our side. If we don't get there this month, next month, next year, the children – the youth of this country – don't buy into those same binaries. They don't buy into the same mindset that our parents lived by. There's a freedom there, and they will eventually bloom themselves and make the rules. Things will be different.

So, the work that all of us are doing – we have to understand that it affects us today, it affects *all* of us today, but it will allow generations to escape the same shackles so many of us struggle to escape. You've got people who realize that they're NOT alone and that there's power in numbers. There are an amazing number of us. It's not that we're catchy, I don't think. I suppose that if there's e-coli in bags of spinach there could be gender dysphoria in other foods. Who knows?

If we can approach time in a healthy way, the right things will happen.

One specific area that I'm very passionate about is the workplace. It was apparent to me early on that the workplace is where most people are going to meet one of us and the only way for us to gain acceptance is for other people to be able to put a face to who and what we are. As long as they hear that word: transgender, transsexual, cross dresser, they'll say, "Oh my God! It's scary!" There are still so many negative misconceptions to overcome. Until they can see you, and know you, and experience your authenticity they'll never come to a point where they'll believe that you're equal to them.

That's why it's so important to understand that the workplace is where the rubber hits the road. People get to choose where they shop, they get to choose where they go to

church, they get to choose their friends, and where they live. Perhaps not surprisingly, they usually end up choosing to be around people who are a lot like they are.

The thing is, in the workplace you don't get to make that choice. You don't have the opportunity to choose the person in the cubicle next to you, or who works with you. It became apparent to me early on that if we're going to personalize ourselves it has to happen in the workplace.

One of the things I'm most proud of is the advances that we're making in the workplace. Just one example: As of last Friday, there are 68 companies that cover SRS for their transgender employees. 68 companies now provide a benefit for us that I never imagined that any of us would see in our lifetime. So, if you're working for a company like Microsoft or Kodak or American Express or IBM – we're talking huge companies here – all the sudden they're offering a benefit to you as a transgender employee the same as they offer to anybody else.

We have to understand that when this happens, when a company recognizes that this isn't the same as simply cosmetic surgery, or elective surgery – it legitimizes us in ways that we've never enjoyed before. To many, it makes this *real* to the other employees and to the rest of society. So although we still have a long way to go in legislative circles and faith circles, when it comes to the workplace we are changing the world in substantive ways that effect each and every one of us. When you go to work, being authentic – being yourself, you are representing all of us. There's a lot of pressure in that, but I think we're up to it.

There are a couple of quotes that help me from time to time that I'd like to share.

One is: "Courage is not the absence of fear but rather the judgment that something else is more important than fear." We're all afraid. Fear is a human emotion – we can't escape that. I don't think it's until whatever it is that help you to rise above that wall of fear that you can really see life for what it is. When people ask me what's the single most important thing that I've gained through my journey – it's not the fact that I get to burn my scalp with a curling iron or that I get to teeter all day on heels or any of the other neat things I get to do now. The single most important thing that I've gained is Freedom.

I don't think many know what true freedom really is – to finally break free from your fears – *that's* Freedom. When you can rise above your fears you'll see that life is a wide-open field and that your potential is endless. Once you break free from the shackles that you'd place upon yourself and that society has placed upon you – that is true Freedom.

So, as you live your life don't see the world with blinders on as so many people are used to doing in terms of simply sex or gender. Our lives are far more complicated than that. Each of us cannot allow ourselves to be reduced to one dimension of our personhood. Each of us must step up and say, "I'm more than the sum of my parts! And, the fact that I'm transgender (or not) doesn't mean anything other than the fact that I've been given a unique gift." Finding your path to your Freedom is truly the goal, I think, in life. And, I wouldn't have it any other way.

The reason that I'm as involved as I am in so many of these efforts is to share the fact that I'm happy, and I'm proud, and I love our people, and I'm here for a reason. Those things all give me a deep sense of value.

Lastly, you might ask yourself, "What can I do?" What can each of us do? It's actually pretty simple. All you need to do is to be yourself instead of trying to be somebody else. In a world that's full of pretenders – my son calls them "posers" – authenticity stands out. I think each of us here would want to be known for our authenticity, and courage, and integrity because once all is said and done, they will define us far more than our gender will.

One final quote – from a Nigerian named Ben Okri. He said, "The most authentic thing about us is our capacity to create, to overcome, to endure, to transform, to love, and to be greater than our suffering." Those are words that each of us needs to keep close to our hearts. They're words we need to live by – each and every day. If we can do that, it will make all of our lives richer, more fulfilling, safer, and happier. I can't think of a more noble reason to be here – on this earth, at this time, in this life.

I thank you for listening.