



Prince, Virginia Charles (1913-2009)

by Andrew Matzner

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Today in the United States there are hundreds of social and support groups that cater to heterosexually-identified male cross-dressers (known as transvestites). And every year scores of conventions take place that provide the opportunity for transvestites from all over the country to meet one another and cross-dress for extended periods of time. Yet this vibrant subculture would not exist were it not for the organizational efforts of one individual: Virginia Charles Prince.

Born Arnold Lowman in Los Angeles to an upper-middle class family in 1913, Prince, a biological male, began secretly cross-dressing at home in his late teens. Unbeknownst to his parents, Prince was soon stealing out of the house and appearing as a woman in public spaces, something that provided him tremendous sexual excitement. Prince continued periodic cross-dressing until his first marriage, at which time he resolved to have nothing more to do with his feminine persona.

Having moved with his new wife to Oakland, California, Prince's pledge lasted only three months, and he started cross-dressing in secret once again. At this time, Prince, who held a Ph. D. in biochemistry, started work at the University of California medical school in San Francisco. Several of the patients that Prince observed during rounds were transvestites. Having felt isolated in his experiences, Prince decided to contact one of the patients to share his story. This led to meetings with other transvestites and the beginnings of a sense of organization that had not previously existed.

Prince finally told his wife about his cross-dressing, and she tolerated it on a limited basis. Soon, however, she felt that Prince, who identified as heterosexual, was really a homosexual. She filed for divorce. The newspapers picked up the story, and Prince was publicly outed as a transvestite. Prince nevertheless continued to cross-dress and soon married a second time.

The publicity of Prince's first divorce led other cross-dressers to contact him. This resulted in the formation of a small group in Los Angeles that had regular meetings and a newsletter.

In 1960 Prince created a magazine called *Transvestia*. News of it spread through a report in the journal *Sexology*, and the magazine's distribution in adult bookstores enabled transvestites from all over the country to have a central forum for correspondence. As publisher and editor of *Transvestia*, Prince (who referred to her male persona with the pseudonym of "Charles" and her female self as "Virginia") became the head of the nascent transvestite movement in the United States.

A group of *Transvestia* subscribers in Los Angeles decided to form a sorority, which they named Phi Pi Epsilon (also referred to as FPE, which stands for "full personality expression"). Chapters, which provided transvestites with safe spaces in which to cross-dress and meet others like themselves, soon started to form throughout the United States.

Prince (henceforth referred to as "she") was divorced from her second wife in 1964 and began living full-time as a woman.

Prince is often credited with coining the term "transgender," which she first used in 1969 and which became more common in the 1980s. But the term actually seems to have first been used in 1965 by psychiatrist John E. Oliven in the second edition of his textbook *Sexual Hygiene and Pathology*. Prince used the term not in its most prevalent meaning today as an umbrella term to encompass all gender-variant people, but rather to distinguish people like her who desired to be a woman socially without having to modify her genitals from transsexuals.

In the mid-1960s Prince became even more visible by speaking about transvestism at community groups and service clubs. Earning money as a consultant in the biochemistry field, Prince spent much of her free time during the 1980s traveling in order to make contacts and organize local support/social groups.

Because of the popularity of her magazines and books within the transvestite community, Prince's philosophies were, and continue to be, influential--and controversial. One of her goals was to disassociate transvestism from homosexuality because wives who discover their husbands' cross-dressing often initially believe that they must be gay. This concern led to the barring of gay or bisexual cross-dressers from Prince-influenced sororities (which are today known as "Tri Ess" or "Society of the Second Self").

Prince also wrote several influential books aimed at the spouses of transvestites, in which she provides what some feel is unrealistic and chauvinistic advice regarding the extent to which a wife should be expected to support her husband's behavior.

In addition, Prince minimized the link between cross-dressing and sexual excitement. In her writings, Prince claims that heterosexual men are not sexually aroused by wearing women's clothing. Rather, she argues that transvestites simply wish to express the "feminine" side of themselves that is repressed by society. According to Prince's writings, it is only by cross-dressing that a man may manifest his soft, emotional, virtuous side, and find relief from having to live up to the demanding requirements of masculinity. Understandably, this view has its feminist and gay critics.

In spite of her questionable viewpoints, Prince must be recognized as a pioneer whose vision and bravery enabled formerly isolated cross-dressers to make connections, locally and nationally. Her high visibility, which continued through the late 1990s, both in print and in person, made Virginia Prince a leader in the cross-dressing community for many years.

Prince died in Los Angeles on May 2, 2009.

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