



## The SAGE Encyclopedia of Trans Studies

### Transexual Menace

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The Transexual Menace (which used the original spelling of transsexual with one “s”) was a direct action trans organization founded in 1994 to challenge the erasure of trans people from the what was then the LGB (now LGBTQIA+) movement. The group became known for holding demonstrations to call attention to the killing of trans people and to the media’s lack of coverage or biased reporting of these murders. At its height in the late 1990s, the Menace had chapters in 42 U.S. cities. Besides raising awareness of the high rate of violence against trans people, the group helped make the trans movement more visible and more political.

## Origins

Despite trans people having been central to the 1969 Stonewall Riots, the 25th anniversary march in New York City in 1994 did not include “transgender” in the name of the event. In response, trans activists, including Phyllis Frye, Sharon Stuart, Denise Norris, and Riki Wilchins, protested the march. For the occasion, Wilchins and graphic designer Montine Jordan designed and printed black “Transexual Menace” T-shirts. The word Menace was written in blood-dripping red letters in the style of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* to mock the “horror” that trans people represented to much of mainstream society and to transphobic lesbians and gay men. The name was a takeoff of the “Lesbian Menace,” a group of lesbian feminists who protested the exclusion of lesbians from the feminist movement by taking over a 1970 feminist event wearing lavender-colored “Lesbian Menace” T-shirts.

Although the Menace’s protest of Stonewall 25 did not result in much attention from either onlookers or the media, their subsequent demonstration at the *Village Voice* was more noticeable. The *Voice* had run an article in April 1994 by lesbian writer Donna Minkowitz about Brandon Teena, a 21-year-old trans man who had been raped and subsequently killed several months earlier because of his gender identity. Much to the outrage of trans activists, Minkowitz’s piece refused to see Teena as trans but instead characterized him as a confused, crossdressing butch lesbian. Several dozen trans people wearing Transexual Menace T-shirts and carrying hand-lettered signs and pictures of Teena protested the newspaper’s coverage outside its East Village offices. At a time when few trans people wanted to be out, much less publicly visible, the idea of a large group of trans activists protesting in public was entirely new and politically transformative.

Another early protest by Menace members and allies was at the annual Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival, which had forcibly evicted Nancy Jean Burkholder for being trans in 1991 and announced a policy to exclude trans women in the future. Wilchins and Boston activist Janis Walworth organized Camp Trans, an education gathering of trans people and supporters in 1994 across the road from the festival’s main gate, and distributed scores of Menace T-shirts, which festival attendees wore inside the event to show their solidarity for the inclusion of trans women.

## Demonstrations to Call Attention to the Murders of Trans People

The success of the demonstration at *The Village Voice* led Wilchins and Menace activists Tony Baretto-Neto and Nancy Nangeroni to call for a memorial vigil to be held in May 1995 outside of the Falls City, Nebraska, courthouse where one of Teena’s killers was to be sentenced for murdering him and two other individuals. Approximately 40 trans activists, including authors Leslie Feinberg and Kate Bornstein, attended the event, as did filmmaker Kimberly Peirce, who was developing her feature film on Teena’s life and death, *Boys Don’t Cry*. The activists remained all day, even after a local neo-Nazi group came and started to harass and threaten them. Eventually, local law enforcement officers had to surround the activists to prevent them from being harmed.

The following day, as activists were debriefing about the vigil, they learned that Deborah Forte, a 56-year-old trans woman in Boston, had been violently killed. Coming so quickly on the heels of the Teena vigil, the news of Forte’s murder created a sense of despair and anger. More and more trans people were reportedly being killed each year, but their deaths were largely ignored by the mainstream media and by local and national lesbian and gay media outlets and political organizations. When there was coverage, it was inevitably sensationalized, as in the case of Teena’s murder.

Wilchins, Baretto-Neto, and Nangeroni decided that the Menace would focus its work on raising awareness of anti-trans violence. The three began to hold vigils at cities around the country where trans people had been murdered, reasoning that a public demonstration by trans people in Menace shirts would force media coverage and thereby bring public attention to the epidemic of violence, especially against trans women of color.

Among the trans people whom the group protested on behalf of were Deborah Forte, Christian Paige, and Chanelle Pickett. The vigils also led to the establishment of Menace chapters, as local trans people emerged as “out” activists, organizing their own groups to move beyond the vigils to protest the many injustices against trans people in their own communities. Wilchins supported these efforts by printing and shipping “Transexual Menace” shirts with each chapter’s city on it for activists to wear at the demonstration.

## **Legacy**

The Transexual Menace waned by the start of the 2000s, as its lead organizers focused on other projects (Wilchins had founded GenderPAC, Nancy Nangeroni had started Gender Talk Radio, and Baretto-Neto led Transgender Officers Protect and Serve). But the group had achieved its main aim. Predominantly lesbian and gay organizations and some mainstream media outlets began to pay attention to the murders of individual trans people and to the extent of violence against the trans community, and the establishment of the Transgender Day of Remembrance in 1999 ensured that the deaths of trans people would continue to be acknowledged.

In addition, the Menace helped usher in more subtle, but no less important, changes in how the trans community viewed itself. “Transgender” increasingly shifted from being seen as an issue of personal acceptance to a valid civil rights issue. The Menace also helped move the emphasis from acceptance by cis society to protesting its many injustices. Perhaps most important, it showed that trans people could put aside longstanding beliefs in the importance of “passing” in favor of being “out, loud, and proud.”

Riki Wilchins and Genny Beemyn

See also [Activism](#); [GenderPAC](#); [Identity Politics](#); [Teena, Brandon](#); [Transgender Day of Remembrance](#); [Violence](#)

## **Further Readings**

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- transsexualism
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- activism
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