



The SAGE Encyclopedia of Trans Studies

Tri-Ess

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Tri-Ess, or the Society for the Second Self, is an international social and support organization for heterosexual crossdressers and their partners and spouses. Because men who crossdress have long been subjected to discrimination from the dominant society, female-presenting crossdressers often feel ashamed of their identities and do not know others like themselves. Before the rise of the Internet, many believed that they were “the only one.” Tri-Ess has helped many crossdressing men accept themselves—and for their partners and wives to accept them—and provided a supportive community for both groups. Through its publications and media appearances, the organization has also increased awareness of the experiences of crossdressers and decreased the stigma they feel.

Development

The organization that would become Tri-Ess was established by Virginia Prince, a female-presenting crossdresser from Los Angeles, in 1961. Prince had begun *Transvestia*, a bimonthly magazine for crossdressers, and the initial members of the group were local subscribers. Prince invited the magazine’s readers to a meeting, telling them to bring stockings and high heels but not informing them that the other crossdressers would be there. When the group was assembled, Prince had them don the female apparel, thus disclosing to each other and ensuring that they would maintain their shared confidence. Because of its origins, the organization was initially known as the Hose and Heels Club, but Prince changed its name to the Foundation for Personality Expression (FPE or Phi Pi Epsilon) the following year.

Prince envisioned FPE as the Alpha Chapter of a sorority-like crossdressing organization that would have chapters throughout the country and internationally, and by the mid-1960s, she had chartered several other U.S. chapters. Prince set strict membership requirements. Only cis heterosexual male crossdressers—whom she referred to as “true transvestites”—could join, as she wanted to dissociate the group from both gay and bisexual male crossdressers and trans women. In so doing, Prince sought to address the two main fears of the wives and partners of cis heterosexual male crossdressers: that their husbands and boyfriends will leave them for men or that their partners will begin to identify as women. Prince maintained tight control over the organization until 1976, when FPE merged with the Mamselle Sorority, a Southern California crossdressing group led by Carol Beecroft, to become the Society for the Second Self or Tri-Ess.

Becoming Tri-Ess’s first president, Beecroft worked to make the organization more inclusive and more visible. She made alliances with trans women and gay and bisexual men, as well as enlarged the group’s outreach and programming. She began the group’s journal, *The Femme Mirror*, which she edited for more than a dozen years, and started its annual Holiday En Femme event, in which members would gather each November in a different city and go out crossdressed. For some members, the holiday gatherings were the only opportunity they had to be feminine in public. These events also gave crossdressers who lived far from a Tri-Ess chapter a chance to meet and socialize with others like themselves. Beecroft also initiated a confidential mail service, organized a project to donate books on crossdressing to local libraries, and encouraged the wives of the crossdressing men to become more involved through the creation of Couples Groups.

In 1988, after Beecroft was incapacitated in an accident, Jane Ellen Fairfax was elected chair of the Board of Directors and expanded the organization’s vision, which was reflected in the acronym “FIBER”:

- Full personality expression, in both its masculine and feminine parts
- Integration of masculine and feminine elements to live as a whole, fulfilled person
- Balance between masculinity and femininity
- Education of crossdressers toward self-acceptance and of society
- Relationship building in the context of crossdressing

Fairfax also focused greater attention on the needs of the wives and partners of crossdressers. With her guidance, Tri-Ess decided to give them full membership status (previously, they had been considered “guests”); established *The Sweetheart Connection*, a quarterly newsletter by and for wives; and started the Spouses’ and Partners’ International Conference for Education (SPICE). During this time, Fairfax’s wife, Mary, became editor of *The Femme Mirror* and greatly expanded its content. Also, Melanie and Peggy Rudd began

the Dignity cruises, which, like the Holiday En Femme events, enabled crossdressers to be out in a safe, supportive environment and meet others like themselves.

Growth

Prince's vision of chapters across the United States began to come to fruition in the 1990s, as crossdressers and their families, who were eager to meet others like themselves and find support, formed Tri-Ess affiliates in different cities. At its height in the early 2000s, Tri-Ess had 25 chapters, including some in southern and midwestern cities that, until then, had few resources for trans people. The chapters sponsored not only social events but also sessions on topics like feminine dressing, legal issues, telling partners and children, and self-defense.

Decline

By the end of the second decade of the 21st century, the number of members and chapters had fallen precipitously. Because many men now find it somewhat easier to go out crossdressed, they feel less in need of an organization. Also, fewer young male-assigned individuals today identify as crossdressers; instead, they more often describe themselves with terms like gender fluid, gender nonconforming, and genderqueer. Internal factors have also played a role in the decline. Mary Fairfax became ill and could no longer edit *The Femme Mirror*, and Jane had to step back from Tri-Ess to care for her. As of 2020, only six chapters remain.

Impact

Even though the organization is seemingly past its heyday, Tri-Ess deserves a tremendous amount of credit for bringing formerly isolated crossdressers together and helping them recognize that they are not pathological or immoral. It has provided support to tens of thousands of crossdressers and their wives and partners and has increased the visibility of this often overlooked segment of the trans community.

Genny Beemyn and Jane Ellen Fairfax

See also [Activism](#); [Crossdressers as Part of the Trans Community](#); [Crossdressing, History of](#); [History](#); [Prince, Virginia](#)

Further Readings

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