



YODA monologues speaks up on disability issues

Production aims to challenge, educate conference attendees

by Todd A. Heywood

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DETROIT - As participants of the **20th anniversary Creating Change Conference** wander the hallways following plenary sessions and workshops, they might stumble upon some provocative guerrilla theatre.

"I am hoping that our performances, which will be strategically timed and placed, will disrupt the thinking of people as they come upon us as old people or people in wheelchairs," said Penny Gardner who has created the program for the Creating Change Conference. **Creating Change is an international conference sponsored by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force taking place Feb. 6 -10 at the Renaissance Center. As many as 2,500 lesbian, bisexual, gay and transgender people and their allies are expected to attend the conference this year.**

Gardner, who has recruited the Michigan Disability Rights Coalition as a supporting organization for the project, said the project began as she was looking at issues to discuss for the LGBT community.

"Within our own LGBT community there is ageism in both directions. And people with disabilities aren't even thought about. We don't invite them," Gardner said. To address those concerns, she tapped into her recent experiences as a performer in the Vagina Monologues.

After her proposal was accepted, she began soliciting stories from the community. The response, she said, was tepid. "Everyone I have talked to about this has wanted to know more, and many have said they will write something," she said. "It has not been fruitful in soliciting stories. It's a reflection, I think, that when it comes down to it, there is an intimidation."

But that said, she has received stories as divergent as dealing with visual disabilities, hidden disabilities and rights, workplace discrimination, a piece about being terminally ill and several pieces from an older man who is involved in the S/M community and has experienced discrimination from being told he could not attend meetings wearing leather to being accused of being inappropriate for bringing his biological son to a meeting. The members of the group thought his son was his "younger lover."

Participation is open to any conference attendee, Gardner said. "I am looking for outrageous people," she said. "People who will take risks, who are willing to be open and learn and follow directions."

No experience with theatre is necessary.

The various monologues and scenes will be directed by several Michigan residents including Kate Runyon - who also serves as a co-chair of the host committee for the conference, Soulforce activist Rachel Loskill, Carolyn LeJuste from the Michigan Disability Rights Coalition, Melinda Haus-Johnson and Clif Levin.

The workshop will take place Friday, Feb. 8 from 9 a.m. until noon. Participants will need to plan additional rehearsal time as well as be prepared to perform at some point over the weekend. Gardner said she hopes the program will be an effective tool which can be taken back to local communities throughout the world and used as an educational program.

Todd Heywood, who is the artistic director of Sunsets with Shakespeare, will also be directing and writing for the YODA Monologues program.