



Espirit

THE PREMIERE TRANSGENDER GALA
OF THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST

A SILVER ANNIVERSARY HISTORY BY STEPHANIE MITCHELL

What if there were a place for you?

a place where you could learn
a place where you could teach
a place where you could dance
where you could learn confidence
where you could proudly be exactly the person you are?

What if there were a place for your spouse or loved one...
a place to feel supported and validated
a place you could learn to love each other more?

What if there were a community...
open, accepting and welcoming
a place that looks forward to seeing you every year?

“The true marvel of the extraordinary is not that it is beyond the reach of ordinary people; it is that it is achieved by ordinary people.”

Esprit, Esprit Gala, Esprit Convention and similar terms relate only to the yearly transgender conference held in Port Angeles, WA. The conference and organization is not associated or connected with the global apparel company Esprit or its marks.

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There is.

It's called Esprit, and its home is Port Angeles, Washington. For twenty-five years this amazing, life-changing convention has been held here — no, not merely held, but welcomed, eagerly anticipated and embraced. In that time, Esprit and the people of Port Angeles have touched — and changed — literally thousands of lives, both of the attendees and of their Port Angeles hosts.

This is the story of Esprit, the premiere transgender gala of the Pacific Northwest: twenty-five extraordinary years.



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Welcome to Esprit!



From left: Janice van Cleve, Debra Darling, Suzanne Adams and Stephanie Mitchell discuss the early days of Esprit.

Esprit. The very word means “spirit.” It evokes friendship, loyalty, happiness, joy in being together and a sense of belonging.

I’m often asked, “So what’s the big deal? Why is Esprit so special? Why should I go? Why do you keep going back?” Since I know my own story best, let me share it.

Come back with me to 1996. I’ve been a closet cross-dresser for many, many years, and have finally got up the courage to join the Cornbury Society (a social and support group for cross-dressers and one of the host clubs of Esprit). Everyone at the meetings keeps telling me about Esprit and urging me to go.

“Why would I want to go?”

“Well... umm... We need you to represent Cornbury on the Esprit Committee.” Bashful silence.

“But I’ve never even been to Esprit! How can I possibly represent Cornbury?”

“Just trust me. It’s an incredible experience.”

I raise all kinds of other objections, but of course I do end up going to Esprit, in May 1997.

That first Esprit was a turning point in my life. I learned clever techniques. I learned easy but essential skills. I discovered simple pleasures like getting my nails done.

And I danced like I'd never danced before.

I still remember those first few days, walking down the hotel hallway, ridiculously overdressed, as I think back, and the smiling "Good morning!" from the housekeeping staff. I remember the cheerful "Hello, ladies!" in the restaurant and how good it made all of us at the table feel. I could relax. I could be *me*, not just long to be who I wanted to be.

I saw how we were welcomed in the town. I personally experienced that welcome, in stores and restaurants and in simply asking for directions (another first for me!) I remember walking into a TV store and asking for a gender-bender (that's an adapter for a video cable, okay?) and the startled look on the clerk's face before we both laughed uproariously. Yes, Port Angeles embraced us, looked forward to us and treated us as, oh my goodness! — *normal* people!

Most of all, though, it was the people of Esprit. I met dozens of people who were comfortable in their own skin and who genuinely had fun doing what they did! There was no secrecy or apology involved in wearing

a dress and heels and having beautiful hair. The effect that all this had on me and my self-confidence was quite indescribable, and it's had a lasting effect on my life.

I've made lifelong friends at every Esprit. I discovered, through them, that who I am is something to be celebrated and treasured. What I do and how I dress is simply an expression of who I am inside. The people of Port Angeles and Esprit have given me the knowledge and courage to become myself on the outside.

I'd say all that makes Esprit a pretty big deal.

So there's my story. But it's not unique. It's repeated time and time again, in everything from feedback form comments to personal conversations to social media posts. You'll find many more stories in this book.

Whether you're an Esprit attendee from way back, a newcomer, a hopeful or even a curious reader, we hope this book will give you a peek inside one of the finest little transgender conferences around.

Welcome to Esprit!

Stephanie Mitchell
Maple Ridge, 2014

How it all began: 90 in 90



The first planning committee. Left to right:
Johanna Bolton, Karen Wood, Dana McDonald,
Ellen Summers, Michelle Lee, Janice van Cleve

“Whatever shall we tell the mayor?”

While this was not the ordinary sort of question you might expect to hear during a gathering of women at a pool party in 1989, this was also not your ordinary gathering of women at a pool party. In fact, they weren't even your ordinary sort of women.

Perhaps the only ordinary thing about all this was that the very ordinary backyard pool was located in the very ordinary small town of Maple Ridge, British Columbia.

One of the women, Karen Wood, was the owner of the pool in question. Her friend Johanna Bolton had come out for the afternoon from Vancouver. The other three women — Michelle Lee, her significant other Jan, and Janice Van Cleve had driven up from Seattle for an afternoon of camaraderie, perhaps a bite to eat, maybe a glass of wine and some entertaining conversation.

Johanna and Karen knew each other through The Cornbury Society of Vancouver, BC. Michelle, Jan and Janice belonged to The Emerald City of Seattle, Washington. Both were social and support groups.

Now, during this otherwise ordinary conversation in Karen's back yard, the idea of holding a convention came up. Not just an ordinary convention, mind you. A convention for cross-dressers.

And there the ordinary ended. You see, Cornbury and Emerald City were support and social groups for cross-dressers. Four of the five women around that pool were in fact Not Your Usual Women.

Social groups like Cornbury and Emerald City were actually fairly common in the 1980s, and another such group, the Northwest Gender Alliance, or NWGA, of Portland, Oregon had expressed an interest in such a venture. They seemed to be likely co-conspirators.

Now, in 1989, cross-dressing was considered anything but ordinary. Cross-dressers were at best frowned upon and at worst despised and even hated by the general public. Being found out as a cross-dresser could have devastating consequences. So right away there were a number of problems to be addressed. However, Michelle mentioned the success of "The Texas T Party" — then a very popular community event. We then wondered if a similar event in the Pacific Northwest would be as popular. Little did we know...

Emerald City decided to run with the idea. They set a simple, ordinary goal: get 90 of their members to a convention in 1990. And thus came about the name: *90 in 90*.

Planning began in earnest in September. It quickly became apparent that many members of both Emerald City and Cornbury loved the idea. Several NWGA members wanted to come, and even a couple of Michelle's friends from Texas wanted to make the trip. In short, 90 in 90 "had legs," and it was clear that still more help was going to be needed if it was to be successful. The small committee of six was quickly joined by Judy Osborne, Debra Darling and more.



After a few weeks of discussion Michelle and Janice had won the approval of the majority of the Emerald City membership and the extraordinary event was on.

“Mayor? Which mayor?”

It was an ordinary but essential question, because the first challenge was choosing a location. A big hotel in a big city would be great to hide in — but hiding wasn’t the point. There were other risks too: people could be recognized if it were held in their home town, among others. So the search began, and Janice Van Cleve finally mentioned that Port Angeles, on the tip of the Olympic Peninsula, might be a good spot.

Port Angeles turned out to have many advantages: it was beautiful, small, out of the way and affordable. It was a small town that had fallen on hard times, so it might welcome an economic boost. Of course, it was also full of loggers and other folk who might or might not take kindly to a bunch of men in pretty dresses taking over their favorite watering holes!

There was some concern among the Portland group regarding the safety of the attendees. Would we be met by bands of roving radicals with pitchforks and torches, bent on preserving the sanctity of feminine fashion?

Would we all be arrested and run out of town — or worse? Karen quipped, “Well, at least we’ll all go down with our wigs on!”

Just to make sure we would have support and protection should it become necessary, we called Mike Cleland, the Port Angeles Chief of Police, and he and his assistant chief Bill Meyer assured us of our safety. Their response was quite simply, “No — there’s nothing to worry about. We welcome you to our city!”

Janice and Michelle Lee undertook a reconnaissance mission and reported that Port Angeles was potentially an excellent choice, particularly as the local Red Lion/ Bayshore Inn was very interested in our business and was large enough to handle the expected numbers. The event was set for the following April as we felt the weather at that time of the year would likely be pleasant.

Debra Darling helped with the organization of the event and came up with many innovative suggestions, including the “High Tea at The Empress Hotel, Victoria,” an event that was to become a staple offering for most of the early years. Debra also helped Karen arrange the “Gala Casino Night,” which was also a very successful and popular event for at least half of Esprit’s first decade. The amazingly resourceful Debra

even managed to get a suite of real casino tables into the banquet rooms of the Red Lion, along with about \$3,000 worth of ballgowns to help attendees get into the feel and fashion of the evening!

Janice, Michelle and the rest of the committee did a magnificent job in dealing with the Port Angeles community to ensure the event would run smoothly.

The next challenge was publicity. Cross-dressers, at least in the eighties, were a secretive lot and email and the internet were in their infancy, so reaching out beyond the existing membership of the three clubs was at the very least impractical. The methods used — snail-mailed club newsletters and word of mouth — may seem laughably antiquated now. However, with a total membership approaching two hundred it seemed that ninety attendees was an attainable goal.

“We’ve built it. Will they come?”

The organizers need not have worried. Fifty-six people showed up in Port Angeles on various pretexts of business trips, fishing trips and golf tournaments (“but honey, you don’t even play golf!”) and with suitcases secretly stuffed with all manner of feminine attire, accoutrements and accessories.

And so, from that ordinary poolside meeting, this extraordinary event was born.

90 in 90

90 in 90 officially opened on Wednesday April 25th, 1990, and finished on the Sunday. The event began with a meet-and-greet gathering in room 148.

Wednesday evening began with a costume ball: it was an extravaganza like few the town of Port Angeles has ever seen. The evidence is on the next few pages.

Thursday was a day for classes and workshops: hair and makeup, feminine deportment, voice coaching and so



on. Classes and presentations took up mornings and afternoons: one favorite was Patti Johnson's hair and deportment class. There were nail specialists and wig specialists on hand as well. Jim Bridges, a very talented makeup artist from Hollywood, California, came and worked his magic on many of the attendees, much to everyone's delight.

Thursday evening there was another banquet, held in the Red Lion banquet room overlooking the beautiful evening lights of the Strait of Juan de Fuca. Then it was off to the hotel bar downstairs for drinks and conversation and meeting the curious locals.

There were more classes on Friday, and a special treat — a trip to Victoria, BC for an afternoon of sightseeing and shopping. There was a tour of Victoria's downtown area via horse-drawn carriage, followed by the highlight of the trip: High Tea at the fabulously elegant Empress Hotel. The Empress was for many years the western flagship hotel of the Canadian Pacific Railway. And as if all that elegance weren't enough, there was another banquet on Friday evening, followed by Casino Night.

The class schedule was rounded out on Saturday, but on Saturday evening the banquet was formal attire with sequins, heels, ballgowns, doorway-height hair

and jewelry by the pound. Entertainment, comedy and dancing rounded out the evening — or so everyone thought.

"We can't have a weekend like this without a slumber party!" exclaimed Debra. So food and drink were rounded up and brought to Room 148.

After four days of seeing dozens of extremely tall über-fashionistas roaming the town, a great many of the town folk were getting rather curious as to what was going on. In preparation for the slumber party, Karen Wood, Johanna and the irrepressible Debra had gone up to Safeway to buy cheese and buns, and of course champagne. Having come straight from the formal Saturday night gala banquet, they were all in their finest of finery, which meant the aforementioned sequins, gowns and hair. Champagne for fifty meant at least a case of the stuff, but the Port Angeles Safeway didn't have a case, so Debra haggled with the cashier about whether they could get a case lot discount on multiple brands. She called another



cashier and eventually got the manager involved as well. The whole of Safeway quickly came to a standstill. So of course, the questions began: “why so much champagne?” “A slumber party.” “A *Slumber Party*? Cool — can we come? I’m off in half an hour!” asked one of the cashiers. Sensing an excellent opportunity for liaison with the community, Karen said, “Of course!”

The Safeway cashier, whose name turned out to be Sherri, thus helped build yet another bridge with the community. Not only that: as of the writing of this book, Sherri is one of only two people who have been to every single Esprit since it began!

From the opening wine and cheese party to the closing Sunday morning brunch, the event was a resounding success. The hotel lounge was packed to the rafters nightly as residents and tourists came to ogle the magnificently attired visions of beauty. The local closets opened and new butterflies emerged. Port Angeles was truly liberated. It would never be the same.

As the Sunday Brunch wound down there were many tears shed as new found friends bid adieu to each other. Many attendees had to appear in male mode for a number of reasons. It was startling and rather poignant to see so many beautiful women suddenly

transformed into, well, just regular guys. Even though many were already friends through Emerald City, Esprit was something different, something very out of the ordinary. It had been a time to be *en femme* for three whole days, to live as who you wanted to be all day and all night, surrounded by friends who shared a common bond. The memories and the joy and freedom that so many had experienced over the last few days now had to be packed away with the clothes and jewelry and hair, no doubt to be treasured and revisited many times over the coming year.

There was one last surprise in store, however. Everyone was presented with a sweatshirt with a specially designed image on the front to commemorate 90 in 90.

The friendships formed that April weekend in 1990 could never be packed away, though. Many of the 90 in 90 would keep in touch.

Yes, something extraordinary had happened. Could it happen again?







The attendees of 90 in 90

The Early Years: 1991–1994



By any reckoning, 90 in 90 was a great success. It was of course a feather in the cap of the Emerald City, which had been struggling with a number of issues for several years. More than that, though, it placed Port Angeles on the map for transgender conventions; it placed Port Angeles in the hearts of the attendees; and it placed cross-dressers and transgenders firmly in the hearts and minds of Port Angeles residents and businesses.

“Shall we do it again?”

That question was quickly dismissed as rhetorical. The positive comments and the warm reception in Port Angeles far outweighed the dissenters and those who feared for their anonymity. The positive bank balance helped, too. 90 in 90 actually came away with \$484.69, which Emerald City put towards a seed fund for next year’s event.

The Cornbury Society and NWGA were both invited to participate and contributed seed money.

“What shall we name it?”

It couldn’t be “90 in 90,” obviously, and “91 in 91” just sounded silly. Finally Michelle’s wife suggested “Esprit” and the name stuck.

Port Angeles embraced Esprit. The townsfolk stared at us, of course, but when they saw how much we spent on clothes, accessories, partying and yes, food, they quickly welcomed us into their establishments. "They may dress like women, but they sure eat like men!" was a common refrain. Many — though by no means all — attendees were quite well-off, and the amount of money that Esprit participants spent on clothes, jewelry, shoes, makeup and hair was quite astonishing. On top of that was the amount of money spent in the local restaurants, and of course on accommodation at the Red Lion itself.

To be sure, at first the Red Lion used to get calls complaining: "What on earth are you having *those people* in there for?"

Loggers and cross-dressers were a potentially volatile mixture, of course. The turning point for many, though, was when they saw how much fun we had and how comfortable and relaxed we were in our attire of choice. They talked with us, then bought us drinks and some even got up the nerve to dance with us. As soon as we showed them we could party with the best of them, the barriers began to falter. And when a few brave souls rose to the karaoke challenge in a local bar one evening, they came crashing down.

8/6/90

Dear Ellen,

Events have clearly overtaken this letter, but I need a formal response in order to activate E/C participation in Esprit 91.

Please send a letter back indicating NWGA's formal acceptance. If you have sent a check to Janice, just let me know in a separate note. If not, please send the check as indicated ~~above~~ but to Janice, & she will send me a copy.

Thanks for your help/support.

Debra

8/6/90

Dear Julia,

I understand Cornbury & E/C have already held one meeting & reserved the event Esprit 91.

Great.

Janice told me Johanna has a check for \$1000 that have been sent to Janice and I need a formal letter back from Cornbury so the Emerald City can officially recognise the committee & join.

Thanks for your help.

Debra

Cornbury and NWGA are invited to join Emerald City to create an ongoing event to be called Esprit.