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# Explosion Of Calls Keeps Switchboard Phone Jangling

By **MARK DRUM**  
Associate Editor

With quiet dedication, 40 volunteers take turns operating the Gay/Lesbian Switchboard of Charlotte every month.

Currently operating seven nights a week, the Switchboard is entering its sixth year of service. John, the current volunteer director, spoke to Q-Notes about the hopes and dreams of those who provide this invaluable service.

**Q-Notes: Let's begin with a historical perspective. How did the Switchboard come into existence?**

**John:** The organization behind it was founded in August of 1980 and the phone line started operating the following April. The first group of volunteers was trained very differently than today: they went to Central Piedmont for an actual structured classroom approach for one semester. That cautious but well thought out approach assured the Switchboard of people on the line who would know what they were doing and could handle calls appropriately. Our training sessions today are more abbreviated, based on our experiences over the years.

**Q-Notes: What type of calls do you receive and how do you provide assistance?**

**John:** We have good records of the types of calls we receive and they help us staff the Switchboard properly and design training to best meet the needs of the operators. For example, this year 85% of the callers were men. A little over 7% were married men with various questions, including those with questions about AIDS. Twenty percent are calls dealing with coming out — the largest category of calls we receive. We refer about 56% of callers to other agencies who have the personnel to deal with the

caller's specific circumstances.

**Q-Notes: Do you receive a lot of "crank" calls?**

**John:** Surprisingly few. Even with those, we try to turn them into a productive call. We try to stress this in our training sessions and can usually turn them around. We try to stay positive. Once in a while, we get a call from someone thinking we are a dating service, which, of course, we are not!

**Q-Notes: Do the type of calls remain stable over the years?**

**John:** That brings up an interesting point. There have been some interesting trends recently. When the Switchboard started, perhaps 80% of the calls were requests for bar information. Last year, about 60% were calls such as this — usually people traveling through town or new to Charlotte asking where the bars or bookstores are. This year, that percentage is less than 40%! The number of calls we receive is even more interesting. In 1984 we received 783. In 1985, it was 566. But we'll have more than 1,300 in 1986. The growth is explosive!

**Q-Notes: What types of referrals can the Switchboard make?**

**John:** We have lists of physicians, lawyers, counselors, clergy and groups such as the Acceptance alcoholics group and others willing to assist gay men and lesbians. Being on the list does not mean a professional is gay, but that he or she is knowledgeable and fair when it comes to dealing with gay and lesbian concerns. There has been the same explosive growth in our own community self-help support groups as in the number of calls. We try to get our number out as much as possible.

**Q-Notes: Do you find that people are reluctant to call the Switchboard for any reason?**

**John:** Only from the standpoint that the person may never have knowingly talked with a gay person before. They are nervous or intimidated and worried about confidentiality. That's something I would like to stress to anyone who is not aware of how the Switchboard operates. All calls are strictly confidential. Identities not only of callers but also of operators are kept anonymous. Details of calls are never made public and are not discussed outside the Switchboard office.

**Q-Notes: Let's talk about the volunteer operators. Most of us know very little about the type of person it takes to do this type of service.**

**John:** Working for the Switchboard is a unique service. It is not a high profile situation. In fact, we encourage our volunteers to maintain a low profile so that they are not identified as an operator. That way, should someone call, they can be assured they are speaking to someone anonymously. Because of this low profile, our volunteers don't get a lot of pats on the back. The reward is derived from their personal experience handling calls and helping someone from time to time. Those rewards can be tremendous! But it does not come from the community at large.

**Q-Notes: Where do you find volunteers?**

**John:** Most people who volunteer have known someone associated with the Switchboard. Others tell me that they really want to give something back to the community, but don't know a great deal about the Switchboard when they start.

**Q-Notes: Is the training extensive?**

**John:** We have five two-hour training sessions. This is the biggest commitment of time asked of our volunteers. Three sessions are provided by helping profes-

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