

Faceless voices, healing words:

Gay & Lesbian Switchboard of Charlotte marks twentieth anniversary

by Lainey Millen
Q-Notes Staff

[Ed. Note: The author was one of the early founders of the G&L Switchboard. She shares her remembrances, as well as the current services provided by the organization.]

Back in April of 1981, at a meeting of Acceptance (which was formed in the early 80s as a co-educational support group out of a Catholic Dignity chapter), a member stood up and made a motion that a peer support organization be formed to offer counseling and local information. Little did this lone individual know that for two decades to come, that motion would bear fruit in offering a caring ear to callers' issues, as well as providing information on support groups, social establishments, etc., for the GLBT community.

It was not easy in those early years. No one had ever facilitated a training for such a specialized peer counseling phone line. Resources were scarce and funding was a big obstacle. However, the two-dozen or so pioneers who blazed the trail to bring Charlotte its first Gay and Lesbian Switchboard would not be stopped. From the time the motion was made and approved, word spread fast to enlist the first recruits. Consisting of both men and women from a variety of lifestyles, a framework began to take shape.

Several meetings were held over the spring and summer. One evening a group of seven sat on a member's deck and outlined the key objectives of the switchboard. Included in the discussions were leadership, staffing, training, location, funding, and assuring the security of each worker during his or her shift.

By late summer, a location and trainer had been secured. Some of the participants had staffed crisis lines in Charlotte and other cities. Others had no formalized training. It became imperative that there was consistency in workshop participation. During these day-long sessions, role play, psychological profiling,

pharmaceutical education and team support were key training areas. Since there was no how-to manual for telephone support, one had to be created. Handouts were crucial in providing needed source materials for these beginners.

In early winter, the location was secured and a telephone line was installed. Schedules were prepared and, though the staff was too small to fill all the time slots, everyone volunteered as much time as possible. The Gay and Lesbian Switchboard of Charlotte had become a reality and was finally "born" in borrowed space with a phone and answering machine, locked and hidden in a filing cabinet during non-staffed hours. The organization was incorporated in 1987 as a 501(c)(3) charitable organization under the name of Metrolina Community Service Project. The name of the corporation was amended in 1993 to the Gay and Lesbian Switchboard of Charlotte, in part to provide a positive role model to the gay community at-large, and in particular for those clients who turn to the switchboard for support and guidance in dealing with the agonizing deliberations of coming out, questioning their own sexuality, and the repercussions from loved ones, employers, friends, and neighbors.

The line was originally open from 7:00-11:00 pm daily, equipped with a notebook which included information on GLBT-sensitive counselors and facilities for those who needed therapeutical support, meeting notices, bar information, along with addresses and telephone numbers on reaching these resources. Additionally, a few churches welcomed GLBT members, so these were included as well. In those days, there were only a dozen plus resources to provide callers, contrasted to today's

broad variety. The staff had to be sure to keep good notes on changes in events, because this was the only information callers would receive.

In order to qualify for some early funding, caller logs had to be kept so that statistical data could be used for determining the quality of the line, as well as knowing which areas of the switchboard needed extra support.

As in any volunteer service organization, staffing was a problem in the early days. As time passed, the number of volunteers and the quality of training improved.

For a time, the Switchboard was staffed every single night of the week.

Today, the organization supports a staff of 50, reaching a geographical area from metropolitan Charlotte and surrounding areas to South Carolina. The organization's key focus areas are:

- Locating community resources
- Providing help
- Creating volunteerism
- Gaining information
- Fostering a listening ear for those in need

The mission of The Gay and Lesbian Switchboard of Charlotte today is to be a "service organization dedicated to providing affirmation, information, support, and referral to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals and other interested people in the community and other organizations as a partner and catalyst.

Its objectives are to:

- Provide free, anonymous, telephone peer counseling to all callers.
- Collect and distribute accessible and reliable information.
- Make helpful referrals.
- Partner with other organizations to strengthen the community.

The Switchboard encourages business owners and providers to list their services that would benefit the GLBT community in Charlotte. Those who wish to be added to the database for referral to callers may email the Switchboard at switchboard@gaycharlotte.com.

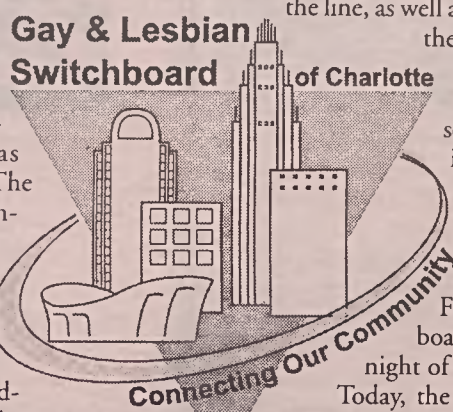
As with any service group, ongoing funding is always needed. Contributions are always appreciated and are tax deductible.

Visitors and newcomers are invited to email the Switchboard to request information. Included in this free packet (which is mailed in a discreet, plain envelope) are GLBT resources, both social and organizational. Send your name via email for the Newcomers Guide, or to be added to the confidential email list, to the email address above.

Whether a newcomer to Charlotte or a "native," the Switchboard of Charlotte is always seeking dedicated volunteers who are diverse in gender, heritage and culture. A monthly two-hour session provides the necessary training for volunteers to staff phone lines. Each new volunteer works directly with a board member for one's first three evenings to continue necessary training and get pointers on proper call-handling techniques, as well as valuable coaching. A commitment of one, four-hour evening per month is requested for each volunteer to make sure that the phone lines are staffed. Volunteers should contact the Switchboard via email.

The Gay and Lesbian Switchboard of Charlotte is the oldest continuously operated program of its kind in the southeast, providing peer counseling, anti-gay violence and discrimination documentation, and referral services five nights a week. Two phone lines are staffed from 6:30 pm to 10:30 pm, Sunday through Thursday, and a voice mail system is available to callers during non-staffed hours at 704-535-6277.

To send a contribution or provide the organization with pertinent information write to the Gay and Lesbian Switchboard, P.O. Box 11144, Charlotte, NC 28220-1144. ▼



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