She's here. she's queer. And the neighbors are used to it.

BY LISA GRAY

Phyllis Randolph Frye pronounces the phrase "voy dyer," just like every other trial lawyer in Texas. *Voir dire* means jury selection, and lawyers say it's 90 percent of winning a case. For Phyllis, it was even more important.

She advertised in Houston's gay papers, and her clients didn't expect much from a Texas jury. They were people like the wheelchair-bound lesbian, harassed and left stranded by homophobic MetroLift drivers. Or the gay cop so hated by other officers that they framed him for theft. Or the transsexual whose things were stolen by a man who called her a faggot even outside

the dispute-resolution building.

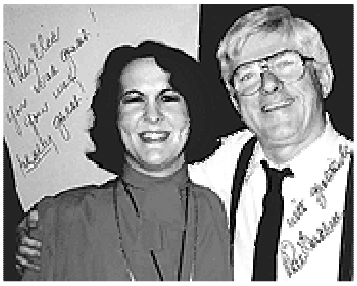
Queens, homos, dykes, lesbos -- Phyllis knew what The Wrong Kind of Juror thought of her clients. That hatred unnerved her, so for the courthouse, she girded herself in a frumpy Dress for Success suit and a Bella Abzug fedora. When it was her turn to address the jury pool, she stood cadet-straight, with her broad shoulders thrown back, so she seemed even taller than five feet ten inches. A lawyer should never let a jury know she's scared.

She smiled the way any Texas good ol' girl smiles when meeting strangers. Her eyes crinkled, and her dimples looked bottomless. When she spoke, it was in a deep alto softened by a sweet-tea drawl. "I am a transgender lesbian," she always said, as matter-of-fact calm as if she'd just declared herself a member of the League of Women Voters. "Do any of y'all have a problem with that?"

Of course they did -- The Wrong Kind of Jurors, the narrow-minded Bible thumpers, the sexually insecure, and those just plain too inflexible to sit in the same room with a former man who now wore a skirt. The hands rose one by one, and the judge always instructed those people to leave the courtroom.

Which left only The Right Kind of Jurors. After all, if you can calmly contemplate the existence of a five-foot ten-inch hat-wearing transgender lesbian lawyer, you won't be fazed by a little thing like her client's sexual orientation.

Phyllis Randolph Frye dealt with voir dire the same way she learned to deal with life. She smiled, she introduced herself, and she waited for the jackasses to leave.



Disowned by her father, but embraced by Donahue: Phyllis in 1989.

With Phyllis, the personal and the professional get all mixed together, so you're not surprised that her law office is a front room in her house. The walls are covered with citations and photos of Phyllis's greatest hits as a lawyer and transgender activist. There's the mayoral proclamation, signed by Kathy Whitmire, declaring "Phyllis Randolph Frye Day" 20 years after Phyllis engineered the repeal of the city law against cross-dressing. There's Phyllis on the *Donahue* show; the photo is signed, "With gratitude, Phil." There's Phyllis at the Second National Transgender Lobby Day, the Capitol Dome rising behind her as she addresses the crowd.

Phyllis lifts her guitar out of her desk chair and turns on her computer. The hard drive is stuffed with legal briefs and "Phyllabusters," the transgender-issues e-mail she blasts to more than a thousand people who've expressed interest. She clicks to open the folder that holds her family photos, and smiles, pitying, as her old macho self appears on the screen. There's one of little Phillip wearing a cowboy hat. There's Phillip as an Eagle Scout with a chest full of merit badges. Phillip as the commander of his high school ROTC unit. Buzz-cut Phillip as a Texas A&M freshman. Recently married Phillip, wearing his Aggie corps boots, his pants stretched tight over his crotch. Phillip, the moustached father, posing with his young son.

Phyllis shakes her head. "I was the world's best actress," she says.

Around the age of six, Phillip realized that his body didn't match his

brain. His brain said he was a girl, but he knew better than to act like one. Not in San Antonio. Not in the '50s. And certainly not in his family. His dad was a man's man, a Methodist, a military veteran and an engineer. On Phyllis's computer screen, you see Phillip trying hard to impersonate his dad.

But in private, the costume sometimes came off. Phillip cross-dressed, and he hated himself for it. "Gender dysphoria" is the official psychiatric diagnosis for people whose mental gender doesn't match their sex organs. The term makes Phyllis want to puke, she says, because it brands transgenders as having a problem with their brains, when really the problem lies with their genitals, their hormones and society. But she'd agree with the official medical opinion offered by the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association: "Being transgender is not a lifestyle choice; it is a condition in which one's identification and desire to live as a member of the other sex is deep-seated, unavoidable, and overwhelming."

In 1972, while Phillip was an army engineer stationed in Germany, his wife left him because of his cross-dressing and took their toddler son with her. Phillip went to his superiors and asked that he be transferred stateside so he could save his marriage and attempt, one more time, to stop cross-dressing. His superiors told him that cross-dressing disqualified him from serving. He had the presence of mind to demand an honorable discharge. Otherwise, he said, he'd tell his story to the media.

The marriage couldn't be saved. In August Phillip slashed his wrists. But when he saw the blood flow, he realized that he wanted to live.

He began to put his life back together. He became a born-again Christian. He saw a psychiatrist. And he married Trish, who loved dogs and singing as much as he did. More important, she loved him, cross-dressing and all. "If that's all that's wrong with you," she told him, "I think I've got a bargain."

Phillip as an Eagle Scout…

They moved to Houston and bought a '50s ranch-style tract house in Westbury, the kind of neighborhood where people take Little League seriously. Phillip worked as a civil engineer. To the neighbors, he and Trish seemed like any other pleasant couple.

But the neighbors didn't see Phillip at night, sneaking out in the dark, dressed as Phyllis. He had begun to "transition." It was a fragile, ugly, in-between state. He shaved off his beard, plucked his eyebrows and grew his nails long. But even in a dress and makeup, he looked like a man. He was tall and broad-shouldered. He still had a man's butt, flat and muscular, and a man's broad jaw and hard chin. A man's voice, and a man's stubbly face.

When he told his employer, S&B Engineers, that he planned to become Phyllis full-time, he was fired. S&B brought up bathrooms, an issue that bedevils transgenders. If Phillip be-came Phyllis, the firm said, she'd have no place to pee -- not the men's room, and not the women's, either.

The firing was perfectly legal. In fact, it was Phillip who was breaking the law, not S&B. Section 28-42.4 of Houston's Code of

Ordinances made it illegal to dress in clothing associated with the opposite sex. S&B didn't fight unemployment benefits, but the company didn't have to. A homophobic referee at the Texas Employment Commission blocked them.

It was the third engineering job Phillip had lost when his cross-dressing was discovered. He and Trish agreed that from now on, he'd tell future employers about it during the job interview. He sent out hundreds of résumés, and over the next few months, was called for at least 50 interviews. None of the potential employers called back.

Trish was furious that no one would hire Phillip. "You might as well be yourself," she told him. He decided to become Phyllis full-time.

As Phyllis, she took voice lessons to raise her pitch, and she began electrolysis. Getting rid of her beard took four years of weekly or biweekly sessions. Each one left her face feeling like hamburger.

She stayed in therapy. Now, in-stead of fear of rejection, she dealt with actual rejection itself, and lots of it. Her more feminine appearance puzzled her son, and when her ex-wife objected, Phyllis agreed to stop visiting. But she continued to pay child support, and every month she wrote the boy a letter.

A month before she went full-time as Phyllis, she and Trish broke the news to their parents. Trish's family pressed her to divorce Phyllis, and when she didn't, all but her mother cut her off. Phyllis's father said he never wanted to see her again. He said that his child was dead.

Around the same time, Phyllis wrote a letter explaining that from now on, she'd be a woman, and distributed it to 30 houses in the neighborhood. Some families were supportive, but most grew

standoffish. One woman, who'd been friendly to Phillip, said she'd have to find out whether her church would allow her to continue the friendship. The neighbor then stopped speaking, so Phyllis assumed that the answer was no.

But the nastiest responses were anonymous. In the middle of the night, kids rang the doorbell and banged on the windows. The house was egged. The cars' tires were slashed. Graffiti covered the driveway, and before religious holidays, obscene calls clogged the phone. Once somebody burned a dirty diaper on the porch.

…and as an Aggie: "I was the world's best actress," says Phyllis.

Phyllis and Trish developed survival skills that bordered on paranoia. They stopped giving candy to trick-or-treaters because they were afraid that if a neighborhood kid were poisoned, Phyllis would automatically be blamed. When one of their dogs died, they asked a friendly neighbor to watch them bury it. Without a witness, they were afraid if a child disappeared, cops would dig up the backyard, looking for a corpse.

Phyllis continued to look for an engineering job. She went to a weekly lunch for Aggie alumni, hoping to network. She told herself that she could wear down the other Aggies' resistance, and that once they got to know her, she could dispel their stereotypes. But nobody would even talk with her. Every week she came home and

cried.

Trish still worked, but Trish's salary amounted to only half of Phillip's old one, and their savings were leaching away. Phyllis appealed the Texas Employment Commission's decision. The unemployment benefits would amount to a piddling $42 a week, but still that would be something. (After a year of appeals, she won.)

Phyllis and Trish drew up a budget. First came the mortgage and taxes; food, clothing, child support and electricity came second. They depended on a garden for their vegetables, and Phyllis learned to sew their clothes. They bought powdered milk because it was cheaper by 30 cents a gallon. During the brutal Houston summers, they didn't air-condition. Phyllis applied her makeup first thing in the morning. If she waited until the sun was up, her face would be too sweaty, and the foundation would slide right off.

Her self-esteem was shot. She was depressed and lonely. Only three things kept her afloat: Trish; her volunteer work with the supportive League of Women Voters; and her church, the Metropolitan Community Church of the Resurrection. In the choir, she sang soprano and alto. (She jokes that she's the only person she knows who's performed the Hallelujah Chorus as a bass, tenor, alto and soprano.)

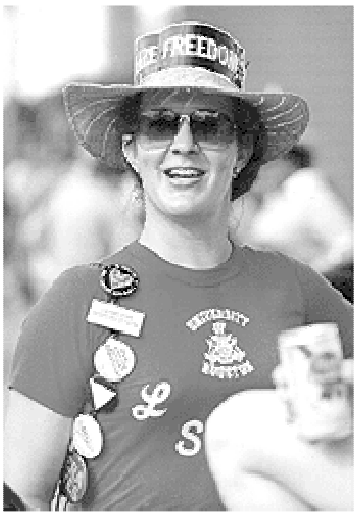
She gave up on finding engineering work, and in the fall of '77, entered the University of Houston's business school. Mainly, she saw school as a source of income. Under the GI Bill, as long as she stayed in school, the U.S. government would send her a stipend.

She and Trish needed the money. Their savings were gone. They had shoes, but not winter shoes, and their coats were raggedy. Every year at Christmas, their church gathered canned goods for a poor family, and that year, the family was Trish and Phyllis. Phyllis

cried with gratitude.

Twenty-three years later, Phyllis looked anything but beaten down. She strode into the UH classroom wearing the casual version of her battle gear: granny glasses, shorts and a "Transgender Menace" T-shirt. And when she began her talk, she exuded a trial lawyer's certitude.

"A lot of people don't understand gender," she told the sandwich-eating law students. "Is it in the genitals? the chromosomes? or in the brain? And what does it have to do with sexual attraction? A lot of people, not in this room, assume that if you're born a man, you're attracted to women, and if you're born a woman, you're attracted to men. We know that's not automatically true."


Taking it to the streets: Phyllis at the 1983 Houston Pride Parade.

The line drew a small, knowing laugh. Phyllis was speaking to the Mandamus Society, a group of UH's gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender law students. Mandamus is an indirect descendant of a group that Phyllis founded in the late '70s, after she decided to add a law degree to her MBA. She didn't especially want to be a lawyer. But if she went to law school, she'd learn how to protect herself and continue to collect her GI Bill stipend.

"Gender identity comes out of the brain," Phyllis told the students. "That's the current medical thinking. If you don't get anything else out of this lecture, remember this: Your biggest sex organ is right

here." She pointed to her head.

In '78 Phyllis began taking low-dosage female hormones, and for the next six years, they worked changes on her body. Her face thinned and softened, and her muscular shoulders shrank. She developed breasts, and to her delight, a soft, round butt. Even from the back, even when she wore jeans, she no longer looked like a longhaired man. She looked like a great big woman.

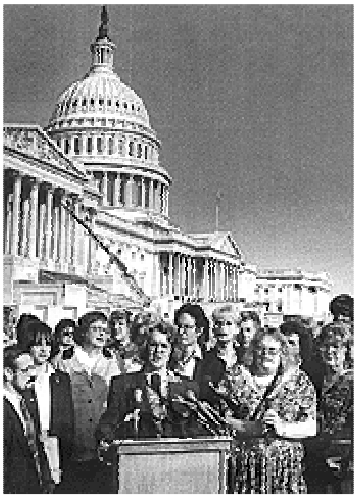
Sometimes transgenders talk about a "completed" transition, meaning one that includes genital-correction surgery. Phyllis has nothing against such operations, but she argues that they're not for everyone, including herself. For starters, they're expensive -- $37,000 to go from male to female, $77,000 to go from female to male -- and it's practically unheard of for an insurance policy to cover the costs. Also, as with any surgery, there's a medical risk. And especially in the case of the female-to-male genital change, the results can be less than stunning.

But for Phyllis, it wasn't just a matter of cost. She didn't want a surgically constructed vagina; she was woman enough already. She won't discuss the particulars of her sex life with Trish -- it's nobody's business -- but she will say that they're happy. Trish, who values her privacy, refused to talk publicly about anything involving her marriage to Phyllis. Never mind their sex life.

When Phyllis entered law school, she hadn't yet begun taking hormones and still looked too male to "pass." The law students, younger and less tolerant than the ones at the business school, refused to accept her as one of their own. Whenever she tried to join a chattering group, it dispersed within 90 seconds. In March she skipped classes and went on a two-week crying jag.

But she also fought back with charm and persistence. She asked professors to give her seating charts so she could memorize her classmates' names. At every chance, she said hello and smiled. Most people were courteous only until they could escape, but a few came around.

Some classmates complained because Phyllis used the women's restroom, but everyone agreed that she shouldn't use the men's. During one such discussion, a friend rose to her defense: "Maybe you'd be happier if Phyllis just used a trash can and squatted in the hallway." Her detractors backed down. And eventually they stopped worrying what Phyllis was doing behind a locked stall door.


Ms. Frye goes to Washington: In '95, Phyllis rallied transgender lobbyists.

In her second year, Phyllis founded a law school group called Law Students and Friends of Gays and Lesbians*. The asterisk was meant to be inclusive, since the little group certainly was. (Most of its members were straight, since closeted gays were too nervous to join.) The Friends drove the campus's conservatives crazy. After the Friends dared to ask for $250 in student organization funds, the Young Americans for Freedom flew in Austin lawyers to argue against the request. That night, before Phyllis got home, a group of students drove to her house, banged on the windows and doors, and screamed rape threats. It took months for Trish to feel safe again.

Even so, it was the Christian Law Society that bothered Phyllis most. Why wouldn't they let her join? Weren't Christians supposed to be loving? Didn't Jesus champion outcasts? For all three years

she was in law school, the CLS met in secret so she couldn't join their meetings. Once, at her invitation, they laid hands on her and prayed, but God chose not to change her transgender ways. The CLS blamed Phyllis's stubbornness.

Near the end of law school, she wrote a letter to the dean of students, describing the CLS's bigotry. Eventually an investigation found discrimination, and the university suspended the group.

Phyllis's letter to the dean circulated among the law students. Everyone had known that she was harassed -- one student goaded her by wearing a kilt to class -- but until the letter, most people hadn't realized the intensity of her misery. To her surprise, people who'd never before responded to her charm began to greet her by name. The change felt like a collective apology.

Phyllis's law school grades weren't stellar, but her extracurricular activities ranged from civic-minded to history-making. While a student, she prepared engineering reports for the League of Women Voters. She was active in the Democratic Party, even elected as a representative to the state party convention. And almost single- handedly, she engineered the repeal of the city's cross-dressing ordinance.

She met councilmember Ernest McGowan at a UH candidates' forum, and when he invited her to volunteer in his office, she jumped at the chance. McGowan got her engineering and law expertise, and in return, she got a chance to lobby City Council from the inside.

After a few months, councilmember John Goodner bad-mouthed her during one of the council's "pop-off" sessions. Phyllis went to Goodner's office in tears, and Goodner was embarrassed. Later,

prodded by her supporters, Goodner moved to repeal the cross-dressing ordinance.

But never mind that victory. Nobody -- not even gay law firms -- would hire Phyllis, and she lacked the self-confidence to launch her own practice. Passing the bar exam meant only that the neighborhood kids stopped attacking her house.

For the next five years, she supported herself by selling Amway cleaners to gay bars, and consulting as an engineer for a gay architect. During the recession of '86, when both businesses were languishing, her phone rang. "Are you a gay lawyer?" the caller asked. "Yeah," Phyllis said. She needed the money.

The man was in the air force, stationed at Bergstrom. While on leave in Houston, he'd been arrested for DWI outside a gay bar. He wanted to plead guilty, and to be sure that the news didn't reach his base. Phyllis thought, "How can I screw up a guilty plea?" She told the man to meet her at the courthouse and bring $300 in cash.

Phyllis fights efforts to sacrifice transgenders in the battle for gay rights.

Phyllis wouldn't have known a good sentencing deal from a bad one, so she paid her old friend Ray Hill $50 to "consult" with her at the courthouse. Ray, whose business card identified him as a Fruit's Rights Freedom Fighter, was also a former felon, and he knew his way around the prison system. He waited in the hall until Phyllis came out. "Yeah," he told her, "that's a good deal."

Giddy with success, she bought her first lawyering ad in *This Week in Texas*, a gay and lesbian magazine. She was scared -- on the

first day of her first jury trial, she vomited three times in the ladies' room -- but she was also a junkyard dog of a lawyer and took cases nobody else would touch. One was a transgender who'd lived as a woman for 20 years, but because she'd racked up a felony drug charge in her teens, couldn't find a lawyer who'd help get her name changed. Phyllis explained to the judge that her client, in her mid-thirties, wasn't trying to hide her felonious past; in fact, the crime she committed wasn't even a felony anymore. Her client simply wanted to be able to live and work as a woman. The judge signed the order, and the client was overwhelmed. As the door to the courtroom closed behind her, she fell to the ground. She'd passed out cold.

As a regular at the Harris County Courthouse, Phyllis smiled, remembered names, dispensed hugs and basked in the kind of general friendliness that she'd only dreamed about in law school. Senfronia Thompson told Phyllis that there was a reason black lawyers liked her: Familiar with stereotyping themselves, they knew how hard it was for her to get past people's first impressions. Gay and lesbian lawyers said that she gave them courage to come out of the closet. Court employees waved to her across crowded rooms. People complimented her hats.

Judge Jim Barr, a Republican not known for progressive views, once explained to a reporter why he sent work to someone who proclaimed herself a transsexual. "If you think it's not normal, that's true," he said. "But is it deviant? Who gives a shit? I want a lawyer who can handle a case and kick butt. Phyllis can do that, so I give her the harder cases."

Sometimes, when the courthouse was treating her like the most popular kid in high school, a lawyer would joke, "Phyllis, when are you going to run for judge?"

She always laughed and drawled the same reply: "I'm too busy running for human being."

Naturally, Phyllis has become an expert in transgender law. She's launched a Web site (transgenderlegal.com), recently published two papers in prestigious law journals, and has a third on the way. In her most recent article, "Same-Sex Marriages Have Existed Legally in the United States for a Long Time Now," she and co-counsel Alyson Meiselman explained the legal reasoning behind their recent news-making coup: a lesbian marriage legally blessed by the state of Texas. (See "XX Marks the Spot," September 14, 2000.)

They counted the marriage as a victory, but it grew out of defeat: the appeal of *Littleton* v. *Prange*. Lee Cavazos was born with a penis, but even as a toddler, felt like a girl. Lee changed his name to Christie Lee, and at the age of 25, had three "genital-reassignment procedures." By all outward appearances, she was a woman.

In Kentucky, she met Mark Littleton, who loved her even after she broke the startling news. They got married and moved to San Antonio, her hometown, where for seven years they lived like any other straight married couple. They enjoyed what lawyers call "private, intimate, heterosexual vaginal-penile sexual intercourse."

Tending her own garden: Phyllis cultivates relationships by staying rooted in her beliefs.

But then Mark died, and Christie Lee tried to sue his doctor for malpractice.

San Antonio's Fourth Court of Appeals ruled that she had no legal standing because she wasn't Mark Littleton's widow. Because her chromosomes were male, the judge wrote, her marriage was never valid.

After the case made the San Antonio newspapers, the city's transgender activists found Christie Lee and referred her to Phyllis. Phyllis joined forces with Alyson, a transgender lawyer from Maryland, and prepared to appeal the case to the Supreme Court.

The court declined to hear the case, but while waiting for that decision, Phyllis saw a way to stick it to the Fourth Court. If gender was in the chromosomes, as the court had ruled, then a man-turned-woman could marry a woman, and a woman-turned-man could marry a man. In other words: perfectly legal lesbian and gay marriages! In September two of Phyllis's clients, Jessica and Robin Wicks, stood on the steps of the Bexar County courthouse, brandishing their marriage license for the TV cameras. The "Texas lesbian marriage" made headlines across the country.

Phyllis urged gay rights groups to use the Wicks' marriage (and two other trans-marriages that followed) as a legal wedge. She offered an equal-protection argument: If that same-sex couple could get married, why not any other?

She's disappointed, but not surprised, that no one has followed her lead. As gays and lesbians have gained political power, they've begun to distance themselves from transgenders. Transgenders seem, well, embarrassing. TV cameras and the religious right are magnetically drawn to men in sparkly dresses, and Middle America already believes that all gays are drag queens. Besides, transgenders are often funny-looking. Some are heterosexual. And

aren't they Johnny-come-latelies, glomming on to the gay rights movement only now that it's succeeding?

That last charge pisses Phyllis off. "Stonewall!" she says, invoking the Boston Tea Party of the queer rights revolution. "It was drag queens who threw rocks at Stonewall! We've been there since the beginning! We're only trying to get back in!"

In September Phyllis and a crew of transgenders stood outside La Colombe d'Or, a mansion-turned-restaurant on Montrose. Facing the rush-hour traffic, they held a banner that said, "Transgenders Are Proud And We Vote!" Phyllis usually stored the banner at her house, to be used in Pride Week parades, lobbying efforts and, when necessary, protests like this one. She was wearing her Transgender Menace T-shirt.

Mercedes and Jaguars pulled into the restaurant's circle drive. Inside the restaurant was a fund-raising party for the Human Rights Campaign, a gay and lesbian lobbying group championing a piece of federal legislation called the Employment Non-Discrimination Act. Transgender groups charge that the Human Rights Campaign has maneuvered to keep the act's protections narrow: gays and lesbians, but not transgenders; sexual orientation, but not gender identity.

Dog tired: Phyllis says she's retiring, but she can't pass up a fight.

On the sidewalk, Phyllis's friend Sarah DePalma handed bright yellow flyers to anybody who'd take one. Sarah is the president of the Texas Gender Advocacy Information Network, a statewide lobbying group for the transgendered. "We do not consider you to be an enemy," the flyer told the fund-raiser's patrons. "We view this as a family dispute."

But family disputes are often the bitterest kind. If anyone needs an employment nondiscrimination act, transgenders do. Lesbians and gays have it easy by comparison. Phyllis could tell too many stories of transgender job losses that led straight to homelessness, prostitution or suicide. "We are talking life and death," said Sarah's yellow flyer. "It is just that simple…Please follow your conscience…Make your feelings known by taking your money home."

The dozen or so protesters were mostly white and mostly male-to-female transgenders. They ranged from comfortable-in-their-own-skin old-timers like Phyllis to relative babies, still in the ugly-duckling stage of transition, still trying to hide a five o'clock shadow under a thick foundation. One of the ugly ducklings said that in fact, she'd just been fired herself. Her employer wouldn't tolerate the change.

It was rush hour, and the traffic was heavy. Sometimes drivers waved or honked. "We're getting a lot of support!" Phyllis exulted. "That, or somebody's horny."

She led a sortie to the restaurant's back parking lot, where she believed valets were trying to whisk guests inside, safe from contact with the transgenders. A few minutes later Elizabeth Birch, the elegant director of the Human Rights Campaign, descended the restaurant's front steps. "Where's Phyllis?" she asked.

When Phyllis returned, she told Birch to talk with Sarah, whose group had organized the protest. But Sarah was out back, and Birch was in a hurry, so she talked mainly to Phyllis. The Human Rights Campaign is working for the good of everyone, she said. ENDA isn't the be-all and end-all, she said; there were other approaches, other programs. She said she respected the transgender point of view and wanted an open dialogue.

None of the transgenders were impressed. "The gay community thinks of us as a bargaining chip," said one of the young protesters. "They say to politicians, 'We'll drop the queens if you'll give us this or that.' "

Phyllis felt the same way, but she was more polite -- anxious, perhaps, not to alienate a potential ally. "Hey, Elizabeth," she said, as Birch turned to leave, "are you going to come all the way down here and not hug me?"

Birch embraced Phyllis like she meant it, then hurried back to the fund-raiser. Phyllis watched Birch climb the mansion's steps. "I don't hate her," Phyllis said. "I hate her organization."

Stress gets to Phyllis. It gives her sideroblastic anemia, which leaves her weak and prone to crying jags. She takes B vitamins and morning walks and tries to relax, but she often says it's time she retired as an activist. This winter she said she might stop writing her newsletter, but once or twice a week her "Phyllabuster" still lands in e-mailboxes. It often brings bad news or seems like a last-ditch call to action for a near-hopeless cause. But just as often, Phyllis passes on some sign that the world is improving.

In the most recent edition, she recounted her mid-June victory at the State Bar of Texas convention in Austin. Transgenders, she exulted, had scored a "BIG WIN." She had masterminded a lobbying blitz for a measure that would ban discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered state bar employees, but even she was shocked when the bar's board approved the measure. "Remember," she phyllabustered her thousand-plus readers, "IF WE CAN OBTAIN LGB&T RIGHTS IN TEXAS, then I don't want to hear or read your excuses for not doing the same."

Just as impressive are Phyllis's small-scale victories, the personal ones close to home. After 25 years, the Westbury neighbors who shunned her have either died or moved away, and their replacements see Phyllis as a human being -- a five-foot ten-inch transgender lawyer, yes, but also a dog-walking neighbor who picks up trash and belongs to the civic association.

Eight years ago Renee George moved into the house across the street from Phyllis. Her new next-door neighbors warned her about "Phil/Phyllis," but after meeting Phyllis and Trish, Renee saw nothing to worry about. She was more scared of the neighbors who warned her, and she was relieved when they moved away.

But Phyllis and Trish remain, and Renee's relationship with them is full of pleasant, unremarkable exchanges. The two families sometimes eat together. They take care of each other's dogs, and Renee tells her 11-year-old daughter to call Phyllis in case of emergencies.

"She's the best neighbor we've ever had," says Renee. "She's thoughtful and considerate. And she keeps her yard up."

Houston Press, June 28, 2001