

Reed Erickson (1917-1992): How One Transsexed Man Supported ONE

Holly Devor



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In order to succeed, all social movements need a vision of where they are going, dedicated people to do the work of getting them there, and material resources with which to support their efforts. In the 1960s, there were very few people who could freely offer any of these for the nascent gay and lesbian movements. Reed Erickson was one man who came forward during this time to provide ongoing financial support for gays and lesbians and to show remarkable vision and leadership, as well as financial support, for the development of transsexual/transgender advocacy on all fronts.

Reed Erickson was an extremely wealthy transsexed man who lived a colorful and eccentric but very private life. In June 1964, Reed Erickson launched the Erickson Educational Foundation (EEF), a nonprofit philanthropic organization funded and controlled entirely by Erickson himself. A brochure describing the Erickson Educational Foundation stated that its goals were "to provide assistance and support in areas where human potential was limited by adverse physical, mental or social conditions, or where the scope of research was too new, controversial or imaginative to receive traditionally oriented support." Through the EEF Erickson contributed millions of dollars to the early development of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and queer movements between 1964 and 1984.

REED ERICKSON'S PRIVATE LIFE

Reed Erickson was born as Rita Alma Erickson in El Paso, Texas, on October 13, 1917. Erickson's U.S.-born mother, Ruth Herzstein Erickson, came from a large German-Jewish family but was a practicing Christian Scientist during Erickson's lifetime. Erickson's German-born father, Robert B. Erickson, who may also have had Jewish roots, was an inventive intellectual businessman who spoke seven languages fluently. Erickson had one sister, Sylvia Roberta, who died in 1990.

When Erickson was still quite young the family moved to the Olney area of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Erickson was a good student who attended Wagner Junior High and the Philadelphia High School for Girls, where s/he became involved with a circle of lesbian women and started using the nickname Eric when among them. Erickson attended Temple University, 1936 to 1940. In 1940 the Erickson family moved to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, where Erickson's father had transferred his lead smelting business. In Baton Rouge, Rita/Reed Erickson worked in the family smelting business and attended Louisiana State University. In 1946, Erickson became the first female graduate from LSU's school of mechanical engineering.

In the early 1940s Erickson became the lover of a woman who was to become an integral part of the lives of Erickson and of his subsequent family. Anne (her name has been changed to protect her privacy) was a working-class New York Jewish woman who came from a family of left-wing political radicals. She held strong opinions about social justice and political activism, which she shared freely with Erickson. People who were close to Erickson have attributed his later social conscience and support of political activism largely to the influence that Anne had on the development of his thinking.

After graduating from LSU, Erickson and Anne lived briefly in Philadelphia. There Erickson worked as an engineer until losing her/his job for refusing to fire a woman who was suspected of being a communist. In the early 1950s Erickson and Anne returned once again to Baton Rouge, where Erickson resumed working in the family business and started an independent company, Southern Seating, making stadium bleachers. Anne and Erickson brought with them a pet Siamese cat named Sappho who was soon joined by a leopard kitten named Henry. Over the next twenty years, the full-grown Henry was Erickson's constant companion, living in each of his homes and frequently traveling with him in a crate on commercial and private aircraft. Henry more than once became front-page news as a result of his frequent appearances in the otherwise quiet residential streets of Baton Rouge's more well-to-do neighborhoods.

After Robert Erickson's death in 1962, Erickson inherited a major interest in the family enterprises, Schuylkill Products Co., Inc., and Schuylkill Lead Corp., and ran them successfully until selling them to Arrow Electronics in 1969 for approximately \$5 million. Erickson continued to be financially successful, eventually amassing a personal fortune estimated at over \$40 million, most of which came from canny investments in oil-rich real estate. Over a period of years, Erickson's ongoing income was often hundreds of thousands of dollars per month.

In 1963, Erickson became a patient of Dr. Harry Benjamin and began the process of masculinizing and living as Reed Erickson. Erickson's official name change took place in 1963 with the sex change following in 1965, setting legal precedent in the state of Louisiana. In 1963 Reed Erickson also married for the first time to a woman who was an entertainer and was related to the U.S. diplomats W. Averell Harriman and Florence Jaffray Harriman.¹ Sometime in 1964 the relationship ended and they ultimately divorced in 1965.

In 1964 Erickson started seeing a New Zealand woman, Aileen Ashton, who was working as a dancer and an escort in New York City when they met. Erickson was so entranced with her when he met her that he asked her to marry him on their second or third date. They were married in December 1965 in a small private ceremony in the United States. They followed this in March 1966 with a large traditional wedding which was hosted by Erickson's new wife's family and which was held at St. Mary's Church in Christchurch, New Zealand. After the wedding, the newlyweds returned to the United States where they took up residence in Baton Rouge. Within four years their lives had changed again in two significant ways: They became the parents to both a daughter and a son, and Erickson began to experiment with recreational drugs. In 1973 the family, including Henry the leopard, moved to an opulent custom-built home in Mazatlan, Mexico, which Erickson dubbed the Love Joy Palace. While there, Erickson increasingly indulged his interest in hallucinogenic drugs and before the end of the next year Erickson and his second wife were divorced. In 1979, after a few years of trying to coexist in Mazatlan, Erickson's ex-wife moved to Ojai, California, taking the children with her. By 1981, Erickson had followed and also taken up residence in Ojai to be near his children.

Around the time of Erickson's divorce from his second wife, he met and began a relationship with a Mexican woman, Evangelina Trujillo Armendariz, whom he met at the tourist bureau in Mazatlan. Early in 1977 they flew from Mazatlan to Baton Rouge where they were married in a small ceremony at the home of a friend of Erickson's sister. During the course of the relationship, both in Mazatlan and later in Southern California, Erickson's overindulgence in the use of illegal drugs increasingly came between them.

By the end of 1983 Erickson had run afoul of the law for his drug problems and his third wife had filed for divorce.

Over the remaining years of his life, Erickson's personality and judgment became undeniably distorted by the effects of his drug problems. Sadly, by the time of his death in 1992 at the age of seventy-four, he had become addicted to illegal drugs. He died alone in Mazatlan as a fugitive from U.S. drug indictments.

REED ERICKSON'S PUBLIC LIFE AS A PHILANTHROPIST

In 1952, seven men, Martin Block, Dale Jennings, Don Slater, Merton Bird, W. Dorr Legg, Antonio Reyes, and Bailey Whitaker, banded together in Los Angeles to found ONE, Inc., one of the earliest and longest-running gay and lesbian organizations in the United States. The men who started ONE dedicated themselves to an ambitious course of action, which included publishing literature, conducting educational activities, supporting research concerning homosexuality, providing homosexual peer counseling, and making the acquisition of property in aid of these goals.

Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s ONE, Inc., achieved remarkable success in many of these areas. They established *ONE Magazine* and mounted a successful challenge against the U.S. government's claim that it was a priori obscene and could not be sent through the postal system. Later, ONE began publishing a scholarly journal, the *ONE Institute Quarterly*. ONE also set up a telephone hotline in a rented office that was quickly transformed into a kind of de facto gay community center. In addition, ONE sponsored lecture series, miniconferences, short and full-length college-level courses, and graduate seminars on topics related to various aspects of homosexuality. All of these activities were sustained with the most minimal of financial resources.

In 1964, shortly after Erickson founded the Erickson Educational Foundation, Erickson's path crossed that of ONE. In need of funds to support their activities and to finance a much-needed move to improved premises, ONE sent out a mailing requesting donations. Erickson was one of the few who replied with an offer of money. Erickson soon established a relationship with Dorr Legg, the man who was the driving force of ONE during much of its existence. Erickson continued to work and to battle with ONE and with Dorr Legg over the next twenty years.

Erickson's first move was to advise ONE to establish a nonprofit tax-exempt charitable arm, the Institute for the Study of Human Resources (ISHR) to make it more attractive for potential benefactors to donate freely to ONE. The establishment of ISHR shifted ONE's research, social service,

and educational work into the nonprofit ISHR and allowed ONE the freedom to work for the legalization of homosexuality and other law reforms. Reed Erickson was named as president of ISHR and remained in the post until 1977 when the Erickson Educational Foundation temporarily suspended operations. Erickson's then bride to be, Aileen Ashton, was also a founding director, a position she held until 1975. Dorr Legg was noted as the secretary of ISHR; he retained that post until his death in 1994.

The money immediately began to flow from Erickson's EEF to ISHR. The first \$2,000 went to the cost of incorporation of ISHR. Another \$1,000 arrived in early October 1964 even before the by-laws were drawn up. In December 1964, a check arrived at ISHR for \$10,000 as a first installment on a "Research Study Project in the Bibliography of Homosexuality." By January 1965, ISHR was receiving \$1,000 a month from Erickson's EEF. Erickson's EEF continued to fund ISHR directly from 1964 to 1976 and again from 1980 to 1983 during which time 70 to 80 percent of ISHR's operating budget came from Erickson through the Erickson Educational Foundation. In total, ISHR's official records showed them having received over \$200,000 in direct grants. These monies were channeled through ISHR to the ONE Institute's educational programs, to the development of the Blanche M. Baker Memorial Library, and to a variety of other educational and research projects. In addition to the money channeled directly to ISHR/ONE, Legg and other activists and researchers also received private grants from Erickson's EEF in aid of their activities.

The establishment of ISHR allowed Erickson a vehicle through which to make tax-exempt charitable donations to support the activities of ONE. Although there were other donors to ISHR and ONE, it would not be an exaggeration to say that *without* Erickson's support many of ONE's activities, and perhaps even ONE itself, would not have been possible on the scale that they obtained *with* the benefit of EEF money. The expansion of ONE Institute's nondegree courses, a great many of ONE's several hundred Sunday afternoon lectures, and extension division courses given by ONE in other cities were all facilitated by Erickson's generous donations to ONE through ISHR.

For example, among the many projects supported by Erickson's EEF was a public program staged on a topic of particular interest to Erickson. In June 1974, a widely publicized three-day "Forum on Variant Sex Behavior" took place in Los Angeles, organized by Professors Vern and Bonnie Bullough, under the auspices of ISHR. Speakers for the event included Vern Bullough, vice president of ISHR; Zelda Suplec, director of the Erickson Educational Foundation; Virginia Prince, editor of *Transvestia* and widely attributed as being one of the founders of transgender activism; Laud Humphreys, author of *Tearoom Trade: Impersonal Sex in Public Places*; Christopher Isher-

wood, widely acclaimed author; and Evelyn Hooker, author of the revolutionary 1957 research study, "The Adjustment of the Male Overt Homosexual." Christine Jorgensen was also there

The earliest of ISHR's research projects funded by Erickson and the one that took the longest—over twenty years—to come to fruition was also one of great significance. The members of ONE were well aware that there was an abysmal dearth of information available on homosexuality—beyond that which was most damning. In 1955, ONE announced plans to compile an annotated bibliography on the topic of homosexuality to at least partially remedy this situation. However, due to limited funds, very little was accomplished until Erickson appeared on the scene and agreed to fund the project.

Work was begun in late 1964; two volumes of *An Annotated Bibliography of Homosexuality* were eventually published in 1976 by Garland Press. The completed work contained 12,794 entries and, as such, constituted an unprecedented foundational contribution to the study of homosexuality. At the same time as work was under way for *An Annotated Bibliography*, Erickson also funded Vern Bullough for work on three other important books on human gender and sexuality.

Another important project cosponsored by Erickson's EEF and by ISHR was the one-month coast-to-coast speaking tour of the United States by Antony Grey, a key figure in the British organizations The Albany Trust and The Homosexual Law Reform Society. The Report of the Wolfenden Committee, commissioned in 1954 in response to a series of scandalous U.K. court cases concerning homosexuality, was released in 1957. It recommended the legalization of homosexual acts performed in private and between consenting adults. The Homosexual Law Reform Society was set up in spring 1958 to apply social and political pressure in hopes of seeing action taken on the Wolfenden recommendations. The Albany Trust was its nonpolitical tax-exempt charitable arm. Antony Grey, as the secretary of both organizations from 1962 to 1970, headed up the fight for legalization of homosexuality in Britain. When homosexual activities between consenting adults in private were legalized with the passing of the 1967 Sexual Offenses Act, Grey was widely acknowledged as a key player in spearheading the campaigns that culminated in this victory. Due to Erickson's largess, Grey was able to come to the United States to share what he had learned.

Perhaps ONE's most proud accomplishment was its 1981 accreditation by the state of California as a graduate degree-granting institution after twenty-five years of offering graduate-level education. In August 1981, history was once again made by ONE when authorization was granted for the first time for degrees to be offered in homophile studies. The first-ever degrees in homophile studies were awarded early in 1982 at the thirtieth anniversary celebrations of the founding of ONE, attended by over 600 people

gathered in the Wilshire Room of the Los Angeles Hilton Hotel. Presentations at the banquet were made by, among others, Lisa Ben, Del Martin, and Phyllis Lyon. Lisa Ben was the pseudonym of the publisher of *Vice Versa*, "the earliest known American periodical especially for lesbians." Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon founded the Daughters of Bilitis in 1955, "the earliest lesbian emancipation organization in the United States . . . dedicated to understanding of, and by, the lesbian." The highlight of the evening was the convocation ceremonies wherein two honorary doctoral degrees were awarded: one to ONE's and ISHR's benefactor Reed Erickson and the other to Christopher Isherwood which, remarkably, was the first and only college degree that he had at that time yet received.

Soon after the creation of the ONE Institute Graduate School, Erickson suggested that a campus should be founded which would be suitable for housing the school, its libraries, ONE's business and "community center" offices, and the Erickson Educational Foundation's offices. For a sum of \$1.9 million, Erickson purchased a 3.5-acre property in the Country Club Estates area of Los Angeles from Elizabeth Clare Prophet of The Church Universal and Triumphant. On the property, known as the Milbank Estate, were situated an elegant 1913-built twenty-seven-room mansion, another smaller but still grand home, tennis courts, and other smaller buildings, all of which were turned over to ONE for their use.

A crew of people from ONE moved its large library and archives as well as all of ONE's other possessions out of the building on Venice Boulevard where they had been located for twenty-two years, between 1961 and 1983. ONE proudly proclaimed: "A landmark event will be celebrated here May 1 when ONE Institute announces its occupancy of the historic Milbank Estate as its permanent campus for Homophile studies, the first such campus of its kind in the world." Eight months later, January 29, 1984, ONE Institute held an open house and convocation ceremony at the Milbank mansion during which ONE Institute awarded a master's degree to Deborah Ann Coates, and two doctoral degrees in homophile studies to Paul David Hardman and Michael Anthony Lombardi, the world's first in homophile studies.

ONE AND ERICKSON: THE UNRAVELING OF A RELATION

Sadly, it seemed that no sooner had the ink dried on the contract for the purchase of the Milbank Estate for ONE than the first signs of trouble in the relationship between Erickson and ONE began to surface. The deed to the property was originally supposed to have been turned over to ONE in a gala

publicity event on May 1, 1983. That transfer was postponed until June 1, and then apparently Erickson abandoned the idea altogether.

By May of 1984, Erickson was fully engaged in trying to remove ONE from the premises and began to file legal suits against ONE in California State Courts. The aggressive actions of Erickson himself and of those whom he hired worsened ONE's tenuous financial position. Both the move from a low-rent location to the expensive Milbank property and ONE's loss of funding from the EEF left ONE facing possible ruin. In order to protect their interests, ONE obtained a series of restraining orders and injunctions against Erickson and the EEF. The effort expended in defending their hold on the Milbank estate effectively paralyzed much of the public operations of ONE. By 1986, ONE Institute had ceased to be an authorized degree-granting institution under California state law. ONE did, however, manage to continue to publish the *ONE Newsletter*, to keep the library open for researchers, and to offer its lecture series.

The battle for Milbank raged over a period of ten years, from 1983 to 1993. Late in 1988, Erickson's daughter, then twenty years old, was appointed conservator of Erickson's affairs due to Erickson's ill health. She, in conjunction with her mother, continued to fight for possession and ownership of the Milbank estate. On April 4, 1990, a judgment was reached. The title to Milbank was ordered to ONE and ISHR. Subsequent appeals were launched on behalf of Erickson and the Erickson Educational Foundation, which continued until late 1992. Three days into 1992, Reed Erickson died in Mazatlan, Mexico. His daughter became the executor of his estate and ultimately agreed to a settlement in the dispute in October of that year. The property was divided between Erickson's heirs and ISHR. The 1992 assessed value of the property received by ONE in the settlement was over \$1 million. By 1997, all of ISHR/ONE's part of the property had been sold and ONE's activities were largely transferred to locations under the auspices of the University of Southern California (USC).

ONE AFTER ERICKSON

As the relationship between Erickson and ONE began to deteriorate, so too did the ability of ONE to function at full capacity. Throughout the ten years of ongoing court battles for possession of the Milbank property, most of ONE's human and financial resources were engaged in that fight. At the same time, their primary source of income, the Erickson Educational Foundation's grants to ISHR, had ceased.

For the first few years, Dorr Legg, USC professor Walter Williams, and a few others continued to provide courses to a handful of graduate students.

However, by the late 1980s only Legg continued to teach at the ONE Institute graduate school, which he did until his death in 1994. No further degrees were granted to students of ONE Institute.

ONE's successful monthly lecture series was also maintained for more than forty years since the inauguration of ONE's Sunday afternoon lecture series. As of this writing, ONE Institute continues to cosponsor it with the Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Center. Similarly, ONE's library was maintained throughout the years of difficulties. It has since moved to a building near the University of Southern California.

In 1995, ONE Institute reclaimed a place of prominence in gay and lesbian history. In January of that year, ONE and the International Gay and Lesbian Archives (IGLA) officially merged operations under the name of ONE Institute. ISHR, which continues to function as a separate entity, supported the merger with a donation of \$35,000 and has continued to provide grants to ONE Institute in subsequent years. The newly reconstituted ONE Institute has dedicated itself to several projects: to ONE's ongoing lecture series and educational outreach, to ONE Institute Press, to the ONE Center for Advanced Studies, and to the maintenance of the combined ONE library and the IGLA archival collections.

Thus, ONE has come through the difficult years of strife and depletion of resources and has grown strong once again. ONE has regrouped, joining forces with others who share their vision, and has found a new benefactor in the University of Southern California. While ONE Institute has revived, Erickson has died, and the EEF has ceased to function. However, the proceeds from Erickson's philanthropy quietly continue to help fund ONE's gay and lesbian outreach, education, and research more than thirty-five years after Erickson first saw the need and offered his wealth and expertise to help make it happen.

NOTE

1. I use the term "married" advisedly. I have not yet been able to find an official record of this marriage although numerous people (including Harry Benjamin) noted that they were married. The sex on Erickson's birth certificate, however, was not changed to male until May 1965. Before the surgery I refer to Erickson as s/he.

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Erickson's work on behalf of transsexual and transgendered peoples was considerably more extensive than what he did for lesbians and gays, and many trans people have come into contact with or have been members of gay and lesbian communities.

I have mentioned in this article some of the work in support of trans people that Erickson sponsored through ONE. My research into the history of Erickson's work through the EEF on behalf of trans people is still in progress. Visit <http://web.uvic.ca/-erick_123> for highlights.

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