

## **Doing It!: CSPH executive director Alicia Gauvin reflects on 10 years of sex education**



Alicia Gauvin

**Violet Vanderslice:** Tell me a little about the Center for Sexual Pleasure Health’s upcoming 10 year anniversary event, “Curiosities.”

**Alicia Gauvin:** We wanted to do an annual event because we think it’s really important to bring our community together. We have a live auction and a silent auction, and also get artwork donated by local

queer artists that we auction off that evening; but it [the artwork] stays at Machines with Magnets for about a month so the public can see the different works. We try to have it center around a theme. It's always a very loose theme — this year's theme is inclusivity because the planning committee was thinking of words [that come to mind] when we think of the CSPH, and inclusive was a word that kept coming up.

**VV:** Is there anything piquing your curiosity right now?

**AG:** I wouldn't say it's necessarily piquing my curiosity as much as it is my everyday frustration. In 2018, some legislation called FOSTA and SESTA was passed and basically this is federal legislation intended to help prevent sex trafficking — which we can all agree no one wants sex trafficking — but the ramifications of this legislation is that it really impacted people engaging in sex work. Craigslist got rid of their classified section, Back Page closed down. That's forcing sex workers who were previously able to screen clients online either out of a job or putting them in less safe interactions with clients by moving them to the streets. That is just one part of it. The second part is that a lot of social media platforms are tightening up their sexual solicitation policies and are just blindly executing it. So we've had a really hard time the past year and a half since the policies went into effect just getting the word out about the work that we're doing. We saw a decrease in program enrollment and we've gotten posts taken down. Any time we've tried to boost for an upcoming event [on Facebook] like Curiosities, it's not been approved because of the name of the page is the Center for Sexual Pleasure and Health, so it doesn't matter what the content of the post is. The way that their policy is executed, they believe that we are a solicitation page. That is a thing that's constantly on my mind because it impacts our ability to exist. My board and I have been thinking [about it] and fortunately/unfortunately this is not specific to the CSPH; a lot of other organizations that do similar work have encountered this as do many sex toy retailers. So we know we're not alone, but it's definitely been at the forefront of our minds. How do we pivot from this? How can we meet our community where they are, which is online, but [think about] other avenues in which to reach them? We haven't landed on anything really yet, but it's one of the things that keeps coming up during our meetings.

**VV:** Is it an algorithm problem? Are you just getting swept up in the net?

**AG:** I would say yes and no. The algorithm definitely does a majority of the work, but specific to posts being removed or ads not being approved, you can appeal that and it does get reviewed by a person, but they are also saying, "No, this is not in line with our policy." And I've tried to press them [Facebook] on that, but they make it difficult to get a person to talk to. You can't get someone on the phone; it's always through Facebook Messenger or Instagram Messenger — it's just someone from customer service and never the same person so you just get sent into a loop. And I don't have the time. We need to move on and encourage our community to share our posts and like our posts because that is one way we can circumvent the algorithm — if people are engaging with the content.

**VV:** Can you talk about the intersection between feminism and inclusivity?

**AG:** The CSPH's brand of feminism is through an intersectional lens. We advocate for the rights and equality of all people while also recognizing that there are different ways people are marginalized and oppressed and that there are different identities that impact that marginalization, which can overlap and further cause harm to individuals. So there are feminists out there who are trans exclusionary — radical feminists — those are people who say that they're feminist, but don't support gender neutral bathrooms because they think that trans women are actually just men in disguise who are trying to sneak into bathrooms to cause harm to women. And that's not the case. We really strive to educate the public on gender issues as well — not just limited to male/female but also nonbinary and gender diverse — and we do work with medical providers training them how to talk to their patients and treat patients that either may be questioning their gender identity or are coming out to them as trans — how to not cause harm or misgender them, how to use the correct pronouns and treat them like human beings. Basic civility.

**VV:** Is there a taboo you would like to see broken?

**AG:** There are a lot of taboos I would love to see broken. When I think about the things that are most basic to our health and our well being, I think of the fact that there are adults who still cannot say the words penis, vagina and anus to describe their body and how it functions and will censor people from using those words to talk about reproductive health. And public health officials have said that not teaching children the correct names of their body parts is helping people who sexually abuse others to get away with it because it's shrouding their [children's] bodies in shame, it's causing confusion, it is preventing them from articulating when their bodies are being violated. I would love to see that taboo completely eliminated. I wish saying vagina was the same as saying elbow.

**VV:** What is your proudest moment working with CSPH?

**AG:** The first thing that comes to mind is just the fact that we've made it 10 years and that we're continuing to exist. I'm incredibly proud of that, especially with our history of the struggle to even open and to exist in the first place. And we've navigated some serious transitions that other organizations may not have survived. One of them was the departure of our founder, Megan Andelloux, who left the organization in 2015 unexpectedly on medical leave. That was a huge shift for the organization and we were really uncertain if the organization was going to survive at that point and we did. And we persevered. It's all because of the really hard work of our staff. And the overwhelming support of our community. Our community showed up and said, "We want you here and we're going to help you continue to exist." So that is a very proud series of moments.

*Curiosities takes place Fri, Mar 13, at Machines with Magnets, 400 Main St, Pawtucket, from 7pm to 10pm. For tickets and more information, go to [bit.ly/Curiosities2020](https://bit.ly/Curiosities2020) This interview has been edited for length and clarity.*