

Saralie Bisnovich Pennington

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“Saralie’s dedication to social justice is deeply rooted in her personal and professional endeavors. Her activism is an expression of the continuity of her dedication.” - Linda Perlin Alperstein, MSW, LCSW; Department of Psychiatry, University of California at San Francisco

Saralie Bisnovich Pennington was born in Waterbury, Connecticut on December 2, 1943, the daughter of Dr. Sam and Helen Bisnovich. She graduated from Kingsbury Grammar School in 1957 and Crosby High School in 1961. She received her bachelor’s degree in Psychology and Sociology, from the University of Connecticut, did graduate studies at Howard University and was awarded an M.S.W. from the University of Pittsburgh.

Pennington has been a tireless advocate for those often marginalized by society. She was a pioneer in her support of the gay and lesbian community in San Francisco during the 1970’s when such activism could risk the loss of a job, family and even one’s life. She not only fought against the prejudice and harassment of the times but also worked diligently to put the GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender) community on an equal footing with the rest of society.

In 1976, Pennington brought her social work and therapy skills to Operation Concern (now called New Leaf Services), one of the country’s first GLBT mental health service organizations. Her development of a family therapy component at Operation Concern was historic in that it acknowledged and affirmed the lesbian and gay families raising children and facilitated the coming out to families for gay men and lesbians. In 1978, when the Briggs Initiative (Proposition 6) was being proposed in California to prevent homosexuals from teaching in public schools, Pennington galvanized the heterosexual community in support of equal rights for gays by founding Straights for Gay Rights, an organization that she heads to this day.

When the AIDS crisis materialized, Pennington initiated ground-breaking work addressing the complexity of the medical, social and psychological issues for couples and families dealing with HIV. Because of her activism and involvement as a straight person in support of the GLBT community, she was asked to be part of a core group of people who came together to form Openhouse, an organization which advocated for seniors in the GLBT community. She helped this organization build key relationships with government officials, senior service providers and leaders in the GLBT and general communities.

Pennington has trained hundreds of staff people and organizations throughout the Bay Area concerning the issues and needs of GLBT member families and GLBT youth. She has presented her work both regionally and nationally at professional conferences including the annual Western Regional Conference of the Family Service Association and the annual National Association of Social Workers Council on Social Work Education. Considered a national authority on GLBT issues, she is a published author and has appeared on national television as both a professional expert and a social advocate.

A dedicated feminist, Pennington was in the first wave of instructors who taught Women’s Studies at San Francisco State University when such studies were viewed as politically



controversial if not radical. Her pioneering curriculum taught women a new way of looking at themselves. She also taught in the Psychology Department of Sonoma State University, presenting courses in feminist psychology, feminist analysis of personality theory and psychotherapy practice. She has published, presented papers and organized numerous conferences addressing the field of mental health and the psychology of women.

Pennington has worked to educate and encourage women clinicians to recognize and question the public’s acceptance of prevailing social norms. She was among the first advocates to establish a shelter for battered women, La Casa de las Madres, which became a nationwide model.

As a strong supporter of world peace, she volunteered for Swords to Plowshares, an agency which serves veterans and their families. In 1992, Pennington played a key role in organizing a veterans’ event in San Francisco honoring Madame Nguyen Thi Binh, President of the Vietnam Peace and Development Foundation and former Vice-President of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, who was visiting on a mission of peace and reconciliation.