



Funding a Movement

By Gabriel Foster

IN JULY, *Rolling Stone* published an article called “The Transgender Crucible,” which featured trans activist CeCe McDonald. The author writes:

“Given the swift political advances of the transgender movement, paired with its new pop-culture visibility, you’d be forgiven for believing that to be gender-nonconforming today is to be accepted, celebrated... But the appearance of tolerance belies the most basic day-to-day reality: No community living in America today is as openly terrorized as transgender women, especially trans women of color.”

In the same article, New York activist Miasha Forbes states, “Every day a trans person says, ‘I may die today.’” She continues, “You ready yourself for war each day. Leaving the house on a typical day, a trans woman prepares herself to endure indignities unimaginable to most of us: to be pelted by rocks, called slurs or referred to not as ‘she’ or even ‘he,’ but rather as ‘it.’”

This article forced me to give pause as I too have been awestruck by a year full of trans visibility in the media, harshly contrasted by extreme violence, primarily targeting trans women of color. According to the Transgender Violence Tracking Portal (TVTP), an online effort that collects data on anti-transgender violence, trans people make up 1 to 1.5 percent of the world’s population but are about 400 times more likely to be assaulted or murdered than the rest of the population.

At the intersection of all the beauty we create as a community and the heartbreak we experience as a result of transphobia lives a vibrant movement. A movement born out of a legacy of refusal, resilience and love. A trans justice movement that is on the rise.

Trans Justice: A Movement

In the 2013 Trans Justice Funding Project (TJFP) report, Nico Amador beautifully articulates, “Thanks to the brave work of many elders in our community who fought the early battles for recognition, trans people are now more visible, and resources are multiplying. This is not to say that the experience of many trans groups and individuals isn’t still one of isolation and vulnerabil-

ity, but the national picture of leadership on trans issues that we saw through the applications to the TJFP affirms that things are changing: a movement has begun.”

TJFP sees trans justice as a movement that works to mobilize trans and allied communities into action around pressing issues like access to education, employment, health care, incarceration, immigration, disability rights, policy reform, racial and economic justice, art and culture, and coalition building within trans communities. On the simplest level, it is based out of the right to self-determine our gender and gender expression, free from all forms of interpersonal and state violence and oppression.

Community-Led Funding

“I was blown away by the opportunity to be apart of the process, and to have had a small but important role in helping to determine which groups were able to get funding this year. But more important, I was inspired by the breadth, beauty and brilliance of the trans community.”

~2014 TJFP Panelist, Andrea Jenkins

The Trans Justice Funding Project is a community-led funding initiative supporting grassroots trans justice groups run by and for trans people. From the beginning, it has been crucial for us to distribute funds through a community led process. We are well aware of the power that funders hold over what organizations have to do, and what issues they have to prioritize, to keep themselves afloat. Rooted in the traditions of social justice philanthropy, TJFP’s mission is to invest in trans communities making decisions by and for ourselves.

Since 2013, TJFP has brought together 12 brilliant trans and gender nonconforming leaders from both small towns and urban hubs throughout the country to serve on our national panel to convene and lead our grantmaking. In two grant cycles (2013 and 2014), this team of predominantly people of color activists has given 90 grants and distributed over \$200,000 to grassroots groups and projects across the country through a simple, two-page

application process. By bring together a multiracial, intergenerational and cross-class group, representing a variety of experiences and abilities, we strive to challenge the dynamic of how funding decisions have traditionally been made, learning and unlearning what it means to do philanthropy differently.

With a staff of only two part-time employees (as of July 2014), this has not been an easy endeavor to pull off. But it has been an unbelievably rewarding one. It is incredibly gratifying and humbling to see funding discussions and decisions being led by those most affected.

Pooling Our Resources

Recently at our two-person staff meeting in a coffee shop in Brooklyn, TJFP co-founder and staff member Karen Pittelman said, “The money we distribute belongs to the community, and our job is to share it.” This ideal has driven our approach to philanthropy since the beginning. When we began fundraising in our first year, we thought we would primarily be leveraging donations from wealthier donors. But as soon as we announced the project, people from all backgrounds—including trans, queer and allied communities—embraced the TJFP. In the span of just a few months, we received a total of 79 donations, and 54 of these—68 percent—were under \$50. While we would not have met our fundraising goal without a number of major gifts in the \$2,000 to \$10,000 range, our base of support was broad, allowing us to distribute over \$50,000 to 22 groups.

We are still crunching numbers this year in preparation for our upcoming 2014 report, but what is clear is that the 2014 cycle brought in an abundance of new donors and even more gifts. I attribute the increase in donors and gifts in part to consistent outreach efforts made by TJFP panelists, more visibility via our Indiegogo campaign, growing social media presence, and word of mouth.

Our donors are trans people and our allies; parents, friends, lovers, partners, and coworkers; people living in and outside of the U.S.; the low income and the wealthy; and TJFP grantees, applicants, panelists, facilitators and staff. This year, the National Center for Transgender Equality (NCTE), a 501(c)(3) social justice organization dedicated to advancing the equality of transgender people, also made a generous gift to TJFP. When was the last time you heard of an organization making a donation to a foundation? That was certainly a first for us. I don’t think it was a fluke that we raised \$150,000 this year—three times what we were able to distribute in our first year. I believe this to be a recognition of a severe lack of funding for trans justice work. It also sends a clear message that trans leadership and trans lives matter.

A New Funding Model

In 2014, TJFP incorporated as a small business—a limited liability company (LLC), one of the simpler forms a business can take. By forming an LLC, we were able to open a Trans Justice Funding Project bank account where we can receive and distribute donations.

With this account, we have been able to write checks directly to unincorporated, non-501(c)(3) groups. Even though this has created more administrative work on our end, it has also allowed us to avoid some of the restrictions of the non-profit industrial complex.

People often ask if this means donations to TJFP will be tax deductible. The answer is no. We will owe taxes as well, just like any other small business. However, since we will be re-distributing all our “profits,” our tax burden will be small. And since most people don’t itemize their deductions anyway, whether or not their gift is tax-deductible will have a limited impact on our base of supporters. We still have our donor-advised fund at Tides, a nonprofit foundation, so anyone who prefers to claim a tax deduction for their gift can still do so for the time being. We hope to phase out the donor-advised fund eventually, but because this is model may be unfamiliar to many supporters, we recognize that this may take some time. In the meantime, we don’t want to undermine our central goal to move as much money as possible to trans justice work.

As an LLC, we opened our bank account at North Carolina-based Self Help Credit Union. Their mission is “to create and protect ownership and economic opportunity for all, especially people of color, women, rural residents, and low-wealth families and communities.” By having our account at this type of progressive financial institution, we are ensuring that everyone’s dollars will be supporting important work even before that money makes its way to our grantees.

Trans Justice Warriors

“This is what we hope and strive for everyday: those small wins and cultural shifts where beliefs of hate and ignorance and systems of oppression are dismantled, leading to a larger goal of liberation for all.”

~2014 Grantee, Adrien Lawyer, Executive Director
Transgender Resource Center of New Mexico

In 2013 and 2014, TJFP applicants and grantees identified the following trans justice priorities: public education, youth organizing, racial justice, support groups, and health and wellness services. Other priorities such as cultural work, reproductive justice, policy change, prison abolition and homelessness were also named.

For the 2013 funding cycle, we accepted applications from organizations regardless of how big they were. In 2014, we decided to refocus by awarding grants only to groups with budgets of \$250,000 or less. Even with this notable change, we still received over 100 applications, allowing us the opportunity to fund some of the most grassroots, innovative and under-resourced groups across the country.

Since we began, we have funded vibrant and courageous organizations like Casa Ruby, BreakOUT!, Montana Two-Spirit Society, Trans Latin@s, the National Native Transgender Network, the Stay Project, and Black and Pink. We have also been able to learn more about and support up and coming groups and projects like the Cicada Collective, the Trans Women of

Color Collective (TWOCC), the Queer Detainee Empowerment Project, SICK (a performance, visual and video arts showcase featuring gender variant artists who are chronically ill), and MAJOR! (a documentary film featuring Miss Major Griffin-Gracy, a formerly incarcerated Black transgender elder and activist who has been fighting for the rights of trans women of color for over four decades).

More than the Money

Yes, TJFP is a funding initiative. As Karen Pittelman likes to say, “Part of our role is to give people the money and get out of the way.” But it has never been just about the money.

In addition to grantmaking, we strive to:

- leverage funding for trans justice organizations with budgets outside of our criteria (over \$250,000);
- encourage donors and potential donors to fund TJFP applicants and grantees directly (think matchmaking!);
- encourage and support other funders to find ways to fund unincorporated groups and projects;
- bring trans justice groups into funding conversations, uplifting their work, rather than co-opting or taking credit for it;
- support and provide social justice donor education;
- strongly encourage cisgender allies to actively engage in trans justice work;

- pay close attention to under-resourced areas and regions; and
- map trans justice work by adding applicants who meet our criteria to our trans justice directory—bolstering recognition and visibility to groups beyond our grantees.

As the trans justice movement continues to gain momentum, TJFP dreams of growing with it. As funders, we hope to be open to difficult questions, to deepen conversations, and continue trusting and supporting trans leadership. We see our position not to set an agenda for a movement, but rather to fund it, allowing the people on the front lines to be the true leaders.

Over and over I’ve thought about what my friend and colleague Reina Gossett said in recent a talk about trans women and incarceration. I’ll leave you with her powerful words: “We’re just now catching up to the greatness of Sylvia Rivera. It’s only last week new guidelines were announced regarding the issues of trans women being raped in prison that she talked about four decades ago. And this is simply the beginning. Why did it take so long? We know why. If Sylvia Rivera and other trans women revolutionaries weren’t exiled from the movement in 1973, imagine where we might be now.” ■

Gabriel Foster is the director of the Trans Justice Funding Project. Visit the website to learn more about applicants and grantees, the community-led funding panel, our structure, and how to support TJFP. transjusticefundingproject.org



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