

Visibility Does Not Equal Justice

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On the evening of April 24th, ABC's *20/20* aired an interview between Diane Sawyer and former Olympian Caitlyn Jenner about her coming out as a trans woman. Afterward, news outlets reported that just under 17 million people watched the interview, making it the largest audience for that program in 15 years.

On the same night as this news sensation, a very different process was also taking place: six panelists, two facilitators, and two staff members gathered at the offices of the Sylvia Rivera Law Project in New York to begin the third grantmaking cycle of the Trans Justice Funding Project. Unlike Caitlyn Jenner, the members of this team were not TV stars or people with the clout to generate the attention of mainstream media. However, I would argue that their contributions and the collective contribution of the 85 trans-led organizations that were funded by TJFP this year (and the many more who were not) represent something far more important about the history of trans activism and the future of our movement.

After the first grant-making cycle of TJFP in 2013, I wrote about how most social movements go through a period in which those who are most affected by an injustice labor for years at the margins of society to bring attention to the need for change. That labor is certainly represented in the stories of trans elders such as Sylvia Rivera, Marsha P. Washington, Leslie Feinberg, Lou Sullivan, Jay Toole, Miss Major, and many, many



Facilitator Nico Amador tabling at the Allied Media Conference.

others who fought the early battles for trans inclusion and gender liberation. Their work is what built the foundation for many of the gains we've experienced and the recent expansion of services, networks, and organizing projects created by and for the trans community. While these contributions and the people behind them have gone largely uncelebrated, they've steadily pushed us toward the breakthroughs that we see today.

This year, the wide-scale media attention on trans identity signaled a shift in the visibility of trans issues and an opportunity to mobilize a broader segment of the public in support of trans rights. However, for those of us watching from the sidelines of the media frenzy, there seems to be frustratingly little space for more than a handful of people to control the spotlight. Those that do are often self-interested and not in a position to represent the day-to-day realities that most trans people experience.

While we can celebrate that trans people are now more widely acknowledged and that mainstream assumptions about gender are being called into question, at the heart of the matter is the fact that curiosity and visibility in the mainstream does not equal

justice. We still have a long road to walk before all members of our community are free from the violence caused by bigotry, racism, and lack of access to employment, housing, and health care.

In this new era of trans organizing, it is critical that our movement is defined by people who will push for changes that dig deeper than cultural acceptance. That means we need leadership that includes a large and meaningful representation of people from all parts of the gender spectrum, people of color, indigenous people, poor and working class people, people with disabilities, youth, immigrants, and those who live outside of the country's queer urban centers.

Projects like TJFP and the many organizations that apply for funding each year are so important because they represent the source of that leadership. TJFP is not just a funding organization but a way of taking collective responsibility for putting resources where they are most needed in our community. Our panelists are part of the work happening at a grassroots level and

bring identities and experiences that shape the thoughtful, nuanced, and often difficult deliberations about who to fund. Our grantees are groups that center the leadership of trans women of color, give support to trans people in isolated areas, create safe spaces for trans youth, build networks for indigenous and Two Spirit people, and engage in an array of other activities that promote healing, access, and influence over the policies that impact trans lives.

As awareness of trans identities and issues grow, it is helpful for our allies to understand that trans celebrities, while courageous in their own ways, are not the ones who are driving the movement. In fact, it is the movement that has made it possible for these individuals to be received positively in the public eye and it is the ongoing work of the hundreds of trans-led groups that create a safer and more equitable society for trans people.

Our hope with TJFP is that we are not only channeling funds to groups who achieve tremendous things with little to no financial backing, but also serving as a reminder that all of us who participate in trans organizing are part of an important legacy of trans activism and leadership. It is in that spirit that we continue to grow, listen, learn from our mistakes, and embrace the experiment of struggling together to bring our best thinking about how to serve our community in the years ahead.

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