

A'ohe hana nui ke alu 'ia

No task is too big when done together by all

As a Native Hawaiian transgender woman, my community and I are often forgotten on the national level as transpeople of color, either because we may not be in the color category highly affected by the HIV epidemic, or because our state is an island further west than California. This has made our fight for trans equality detrimental to our survival.

Historical and cultural evidence of *māhū* (transgender person) in pre-colonial Hawai'i includes persons who were *ali'i* (royalty), *maka'ainana* (common people), *kāhuna* (priests), and *kāula* (prophets or wizards). Many *māhū* had a special *kūlana* (status or rank) because they embodied both sexes of spiritual hermaphroditic gods and goddesses. In ancient Hawaiian culture, the *māhū* were valued as strong, powerful, compassionate, and dutiful with special *mana* (spiritual power).

In modern Hawaiian society, Native Hawaiian transgender women are more likely to be arrested and incarcerated in their search for their role in society. The lack of access to medical care, unstable housing situations, and lack of emotional support are detrimental to the self-esteem and societal success for the Native Hawaiian transwoman trying to make it in mainstream society. The once-revered *māhū* is now seen as a dishonorable burden on society, oftentimes forced to engage in survival sex work because they aren't able to obtain gainful employment. Additionally, *māhū* without supportive networks are forced to live in the streets or they end up in jail or prison because they were forced out of their families' homes at a young age. The *māhū* who was honored and revered in traditional Hawaiian culture has now become ostracized and banished from their own people.

The Native Hawaiian transgender community has been fighting for social justice since the early 1960s, when transwomen were killed, sexually assaulted, and left for dead in rural



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parts of the island. The lawmakers and local police force felt the answer to stop these killings was to make all transwomen wear a large red button that said, "I am a BOY," so that men were not "fooled" by their femininity. In the 50 years since then, Native Hawaiian trans communities have made significant progress to protect the rights and lives of our trans people.

Many Hawai'i state laws and policies have been passed that protect transgender and gender non-conforming persons: the employment discrimination law in effect since 1991; the 2015 gender marker amendment law for Hawai'i birth certificates; the Board of Education's development and implementation of transgender student guidelines pushed forward in 2016; and the 2017 medical insurance discrimination laws. But even with all these protective laws and policies, we are still not fully accepted into society. Families are still disowning and shunning their trans children. Employers are still reluctant to hire transgender or gender non-conforming people because their physical characteristics aren't aligned with their birth gender.

Stigma, shame, and the lack of societal acceptance in mainstream society has caused a lower self-esteem in people who were once honored and revered. This is why grassroots programs are so important to the survival of trans communities of color like the Native Hawaiian transgender people. Through peer-led social support and trans-led advocacy group efforts, culturally appropriate services are giving our trans communities a place of respect in society.

Being a part of the TJFP grantmakers panel 2017, I was able to see the continuous efforts that trans-led groups have been

making across the nation. I was given the opportunity to read grant applications that shared their fight for survival to be a part of a society that doesn't want them to exist alongside the cis and hetero-normative society. Over 170 applications were reviewed and through this process I was able to see groups of transgender communities being formed to rise up against societal oppression. Each of these applications held stories of trans communities fighting society to be given an equal and fair right to exist. Seeing the continuous efforts of trans-led groups creating social change for their communities reminded me of why we must continue to strengthen our voices against discrimination and harassment and support grassroots programs across the nation.

Through TJFP's 2017 grant awards, I found that there are: transleaders being developed; groups of transgender communities being supported; historical collections of transgender stories being shared; and anti-discrimination laws being advocated for. The TJFP grantmaking process fueled my passion to support trans-led groups and their efforts for transrights, transequality, and transliberation.

The beautiful culture of our transgender people of color across the nation is still being forced into survival mode and it is up to us, transpeople of color, to stand together and support each other's fights. Thank you, TJFP, for changing the way we stand for social justice.

-Cathy Kapua