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Views: Remembering Trans Dead, Empowering Trans Living

Amidst the foliage of mid-October, the shortening hours of daylight and the onset of winter, I made a promise to myself not to look at this season as an end of something, but as an opportunity to begin something new. It was more than a month until November 20th, and a small committee convened to begin planning for the Fifth Annual Transgender Day of Remembrance – the second that will be held in Burlington, Vermont.

Those of us familiar with the history of this event know this occasion began as a way to honor the unsolved murder of Rita Hester, a transwoman who was stabbed to death on November 28, 1998 in an act of anti-transgender violence in Boston, Massachusetts. Others of us are merely beginning a journey and have not yet witnessed the list of nearly 300 names and stories at www.gender.org, a website created by Gwendolyn Ann Smith to memorialize victims of anti-transgender violence from 1970 to the present. There are 35 new names listed since last year's Day of Remembrance, and with an average of more than one murder per month another name may well be added to that list before this piece goes to press.

For the past three days, I have researched and ingested a history of the transgendered community. The lives of our brothers and sisters are unceremoniously delivered in shocking and graphic headlines, their preferred names and pronouns rescored to reflect previous names incongruent with their gender.

Media accounts could tell us the accomplishments of transgendered individuals, who they will be survived by, the vacancies they will leave in their communities. Instead, commemoration is traded for sensationalized stories of someone caught in the "wrong" attire while truly harrowing phrases numb with repetition. "Killed," "strangled," "shot in the face ten times," "stabbed in the back 121 times," "hit in the head with a sledge hammer," "sexually mutilated," "beheaded," "run down by a car."

These are the outstretched hands we must clasp in introduction, with fear, with resolution. These are the hands of our history reaching out before us for recognition, vindication and deliverance.

Or perhaps it is my own hand reaching and seeking because the dead are the inheritance of the living, and when their deaths go unchallenged and unremembered this



too becomes our inheritance. In the US, there are still no federal laws against discrimination based on gender identity. Only seven states and the District of Columbia cover gender identity under their hate-crime laws. Many murder cases involving the death of transgendered individuals are unsolved and will remain unsolved due to failure by authorities

whether or not they identify as transgendered. For example, Willie Houston was killed not because he was transgendered, but because he was *perceived* as being transgendered, or perhaps gay, when he helped a blind man use the restroom while holding his wife's pocketbook. Yet education on gender transgression is allocated to the transgender community despite the unsettling truth that all communities are affected by anti-transgender sentiment.

Worse still, the lives and stories of significant others of trans people such as Private Barry Winchell or lives that have gained national acclaim such as Brandon Teena are swallowed whole and relabeled as "gay" and "lesbian" respectively by media who claimed to advocate on the behalf of the GLBT community. Winchell's death was labeled an "anti-gay" crime for use

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to investigate possible leads or to arrest known suspects.

Our inheritance is lack of protection under law and prison systems that improperly house transgender inmates and deny them continued use of hormones. We use and pass on medical facilities that fail to provide proficient service to transgendered people, including adequate treatment and preventative education for HIV/AIDS. What is left for our young are school systems that allow students to be suspended for wearing "gender inappropriate" clothing and fail to provide non-harassment policies for the safety and comfort of transgendered students.

Many feminine men and masculine women feel the strains and repercussions of gender transgression

against the military's "Don't ask, don't tell" policy despite the fact that he never dated men and that he was survived by his lover – a transwoman – Calpernia Adams. Such misconstructions erase the visibility of transgendered people and transgendered reality.

Likewise, when we remember our dead let us accurately reflect upon the reality of transgender violence. Many of the near-300 names belong to transwomen, many to transwomen of color, many to sex workers, drug users, homeless people and people living with AIDS. Mainstream media continues to sweep aside such details or portrays them as unsavory additions to a transgendered identity. The remembrance of our predecessors is an opportunity to reclaim, to accu-



mekoen@sover.net

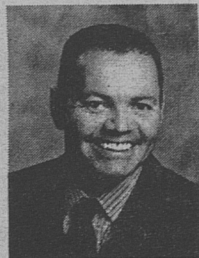
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Clifford D. Trott, Jr., Ph.D.
 Licensed Clinical Psychologist - Doctorate

168 Battery Street
 Burlington, Vermont 05401
 802.862.0836
 ctrott@together.net