

Astraea LESBIAN FOUNDATION FOR JUSTICE

threads

Welcome to *threads* Winter 2009, the print issue of our online publication, *eThreads*. In these pages, read inspiring stories featuring Astraea's strategic work and our incredible community of grantees and donors. Then, visit us online for artwork, video, and more. We believe that social change results from the powerful collective action of people working together. Connecting communities is at the core of our work, and we hope that *threads* will strengthen, even further, our connection with you.

Building Community to End Hate Crimes

In April 2008, the Lesbian and Gay Equality Project was conducting activist trainings in Kwa-Thema Township, South Africa. Walking home one night, one of the members—Eudy Simelane, an out butch lesbian activist and a former national soccer star—was gang-raped and murdered. Already building a base of politically educated and active LGBTI citizens and supporters in low-income and majority-black townships, the Project turned grief into action and mobilized hundreds in response.

Under the leadership of Executive Director Phumi Mtewa, the Project called out to a diverse group—government officials, reli-



Project members and allies at Kwa-Thema Township's first Pride March
Photo courtesy of Lesbian and Gay Equality Project

gious leaders, LGBTI people and straight allies. Together, they led the fight for the investigation of the rape and murder as a hate crime and to bring the case to trial.

Almost a year after the murder, they succeeded. With emergency funding from Astraea, Project members worked day and night. They galvanized 500 people to show support as the trial dragged on for three days, busing in those without means of travel. They fed the growing crowd of supporters and provided coun-

seling as the details of the crime were revealed. They landed national and international press coverage for the case and conducted over 30 radio and television interviews. One perpetrator confessed and was sentenced to life in prison. Separate trials for the other three men indicted continued; two were acquitted. Finally, in September 2009, the last perpetrator was convicted and sentenced to 32 years in prison. The Project's efforts had paid off. Despite more than 30 reported murders of LGBT people in the

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Securing Big Changes Across Latin America


In a region where Catholicism and growing Christian Evangelism hold powerful sway over state and social affairs, LGBTI activists in Latin America have made incredible progress. Hard-won legal protections are now on the books in many countries, but much remains to be done to firmly establish the region as a safe place for women and LGBTI people. Astraea's commitment to breaking down walls and creating a global

In a modest retreat center owned by a local teachers union, the activists worked for five days and five nights. They gained skills and formed alliances across Ecuador, Bolivia, the Dominican Republic and Perú, countries where Astraea's project grants are focused. Both laughter and tears welled up as the activists broke through the isolation often faced by those who, in any society, go against the grain.

and media. The convening was enriched by film screenings, performances and visits to local social justice groups and a human rights monument.

"It's been a space with so much richness; it's been very refreshing. We had the opportunity to meet and to be in a place of differences and connections with other organizations. It's been so important to share in this process," said Danna Galán of Bolivia's Centro de Acción Investigación Trans Familia Galán.

Participants honed their political thinking, gained skills and were reinvigorated to return to work with new purpose. In each country, they aim to make deep changes in society—from founding a lesbian-feminist community school and national trans cultural center to ending hate crimes and stopping the forced hospitalization of young lesbians. As agents of change, they are moving people to become well informed and politically engaged to work for peace, secularity and equality.

The Lima convening is a milestone in an ongoing Latin American partnership. At this crucial point, where LBT organizers are holding the line on legislative gains and working for lasting cultural change, the collaboration has increased resources where some funders have pulled out, thinking the work is done. For Astraea and the Consortium, it is time to engage more intensely in a long-term vision for change in Latin America and around the world. 



Convening Reporter Bethsabé Huamán, Instituto Runa, Peru; Convening Consultant Nadia Bazán, Colombia; Isabel Spencer, Las Tres Gatas, Dominican Republic
Photo by Mirla Hernández

movement for social change pushes us to go beyond grantmaking alone and forge new collaborative models and transnational networks. To that end, Astraea has joined the historic Consortium of Latin American Women's Funds' lesbian, bisexual and transgender project as a guest fund based in the North. It is an effort to pool resources in a region-wide force for social and political transformation.

The project connects more than 60 organizations in 17 countries from México to Argentina. Across Latin America, the funds are in constant contact, distributing grants and gathering grantees in regional meetings. In early 2009, Astraea convened 26 lesbian and trans activists in Lima, Perú. Astraea program staff worked closely with a Perú-based grantee partner (Instituto Runa) and a local consultant in an exhaustive effort to tailor the convening to grantees' needs and vision.

Las Tres Gatas, which Astraea encouraged to apply for funding, does just that. Las Tres Gatas is collaborating with women's organizations to bring positive change to their nation's constitution and is holding weekly film screenings for visibility. In the Dominican Republic, except for limited lesbian organizing in the '80s and '90s and HIV prevention programs, most LGBTI people have traditionally been underground. Thus, Las Tres Gatas' work is outspoken but lonely. Member Mirla Hernández said of the convening, "One of the things that has impacted me most about being here is that I'm starting to regain hope."

The convening gave the multigenerational group an opportunity to work with each other not only across national borders but within them. Joining activists who sometimes came from the same cities but hadn't worked together before meant difficult conversations and newfound trust. They shared the sociopolitical context of their countries and outcomes of coalition work with other social movements, and delved into trainings on organizational development, fundraising



The Lima convening grantee partners and staff



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last decade, it was the first time that a trial had led to convictions.

Kwa-Thema Township served as a gay haven in the '80s, which is unique in South Africa, where 80% of adults believe homosexuality is "always wrong,"¹ and in a recent study, one in four men admitted to rape.² This attitude and pervasive sexual violence are compounded in a growing trend of "curative rape," purported to cure homosexuality and remind women of their proper place. By contrast, the South African Constitution prohibits discrimination based on gender or sexual orientation, and the country was the first in Africa and fifth in the world to legalize same-sex marriage. The rape and murder of Eudy and other lesbians and gender-non-conforming people bring this disparity into sharp relief.

For this reason, the Project takes every opportunity to forge dialogue for cultural change. In April 2009, Project members gathered 700 people to build a memorial bridge across the ditch where Eudy's body was discovered. Eudy's family and the family priest, along with lesbian activists, African National Congress members and other township residents worked for

several days. Men laid cement blocks, and old metal was welded together for a handrail to assist children and the elderly across. A stone mosaic of Eudy's name was arranged in the cement.



Pictured here at the site where Eudy's body was found, her mother (2nd from left) has been deeply involved in the Project.
Photo courtesy of Lesbian and Gay Equality Project

It was a monumental display of community support. But change is slow. Not two months later, a former teammate of Eudy's and outspoken LGBTI activist, Girly Nkosi, was badly beaten in an alley and passed away in the hospital.

Grieving but unthwarted, the Project members and allies stood up in the face of the backlash. In September 2009, in collaboration with other LGBTI groups

(including several Astraea grantee partners), they organized the first-ever Pride March through the township, co-led by Eudy's mother. Freedom songs reverberated through the main streets of Kwa-Thema. Eudy and Girly's families and more than 600 people attended. A member of parliament and the mayor made speeches in support of the LGBTI community, marking another first.

The Lesbian and Gay Equality Project is preparing for the struggles ahead, to stem the increasing tide of violence against women and LGBTI people, reinvigorate the township as a safe haven and place of resistance, and finally end economic and social inequalities for all people in South Africa. Despite the nation's LGBTI-friendly laws, Phumi emphasizes the slow and crucial work needed for cultural change, "to truly live the freedom, dignity and equality promised by our Constitution."³

¹ "Pride and Prejudice: Public attitudes toward homosexuality." *Human Sciences Research Council Review*, vol. 6, no. 4 (Nov. 2008), http://www.hsrb.ac.za/HSRC_Review_Article-121.phtml.

² Rachel Jewkes, Yandisa Sikweyiya, Robert Morrell, Kristin Dunkle, "Understanding Men's Health and Use of Violence: Interface of Rape and HIV in South Africa, Executive Summary," *Gender & Health Research Unit, South Africa Medical Research Council* (June 2009, p. 1), www.mrc.ac.za/gender/men_exec_smry.pdf.

In It for the Long Haul: Arlene and Somjen

Arlene Bronstein is a 60-year-old lung-cancer survivor and retired law firm records manager. Somjen Frazer is a 27-year-old research and evaluation consultant for progressive non-profits and half of the comedy duo Mustache Clowns. What do they have in common? Astraea, for one. Both are expressing their strong commitment to LGBTI arts and activism around the globe by making a contribution every month. For

decades, Arlene, Somjen and donors like them have been integral parts of Astraea's success.

"Astraea interprets 'community' in the widest possible sense."

—Arlene Bronstein, Astraea donor

"I'm a quiet donor," Arlene said. Though modest about her impact, she has been a monthly sustainer for nearly three decades. It adds up. Over the years, Arlene has given more than \$20,000.

"At first, I liked that Astraea was the only charity devoted to lesbian issues, though that was not openly stated.

Of course, it was also the connection to Margot Karle." Margot and Arlene became immediate and life-long best friends in high school. Later, Margot became a lawyer and provided pro bono legal work for Astraea when it was founded, remaining an ardent supporter. After she passed away, Arlene began making contributions in her memory.

"Now there are other lesbian charities," Arlene said, "but in my mind, Astraea still is the most diverse regarding the community it deals with. Astraea interprets 'community' in the widest possible sense."

Arlene and donors like her have helped
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insure the growth and impact of Astraea, from a small regional foundation granting just \$6,000 in the first year to an international force for change, distributing \$2.2 million last year to LGBTI activists working for human rights worldwide.



Somjen Frazer, Astraea donor

Recently, Somjen Frazer joined Arlene and the community of donors pooling their resources for substantial and sustainable change.

Somjen acted on her commitment to Astraea's impact around the world by writing her monthly \$100 donation into her consulting firm's business plan. She says of her gift, "I love the idea of giving monthly, rather than annually

or just when I'm asked. I grew up in a Southern Baptist community, where tithing 10 percent of your income to the church is the standard. Giving monthly is being thoughtful about what the opposition is doing and what we can do to match that."

"I like Astraea because it believes in taking chances on groups that otherwise won't get funded," Somjen said. "Astraea helps me because I'm not in a position to decide which groups to give to. Astraea has a decision-making model, utilizing the expertise of community activists, that I can trust."

Astraea's growing core of monthly donors provides dependable support throughout the year. Monthly gifts provide a consistent way to support feminist social justice work around the globe and can provide an opportunity to give even more by breaking the gift into installments. "Giving monthly makes it easier to give a substantial amount of money," Arlene said. "I want to be able to give as much as I can because I support the mission."

Join Arlene and Somjen and become a monthly sustainer today!

Don't miss a thing! VISIT eThreads.org:

- 1 Art: 2009 Visual Arts Awardees and their work
- 2 Video: Jamaican LGBT and Women's Rights Activist
- 3 Philanthropy: A new memorial fund at Astraea
- 4 Introducing: The newest member of Astraea's staff

Sign up online to be the first to receive the next issue of eThreads.

OUR MISSION

The Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice works for social, racial, economic and gender justice in the U.S. and internationally. Our grantmaking and philanthropic advocacy programs help lesbians and allied communities challenge oppression and claim their human rights.

Astraea received the highest rating of four stars from Charity Navigator—an honor given to less than a quarter of America's nonprofits. For more information, visit charitynavigator.org.

Astraea threads Winter 09

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