

BURNING THE CANDLE AT BOTH ENDS

Vigil honors victims of hate, terror

by Kelly Reilly • Photos by Marty Davis



Hundreds pack Pioneer Courthouse Square to honor Loni Kai Okaruru as well as those who died Sept. 11

As the sun set Sept. 14, the light of more than 500 candles in Pioneer Courthouse Square illuminated the sorrow, hopes and fears of trans people everywhere.

The vigil, sponsored by numerous groups representing sexual minorities, was called to honor the memory of Loni Kai Okaruru, who was brutally slain by an unknown assailant Aug. 26 in rural Washington County. Dozens of people also came downtown to recognize the thousands killed during the terrorist attacks Sept. 11 in New York, Pennsylvania and Washington, D.C.

Before the event began, several participants voiced their opinions and expressed their feelings about the tragic circumstances surrounding Okaruru's death. One was Bethany Hermania, a trans woman from Washington County.

"A lot of us trans people refer to ourselves as sisters, like we are related by blood," she said. "In fact, we are related by blood. The blood that was shed in violence. Then of course there's the blood of self-destruction, the blood of the young person that's afraid that they are a freak and slashes their wrists. The blood we shed working to correct our bodies to match our minds. Remember also the emotional blood of families that are split apart because a parent is transgendered. We all have the same fight."

The deeply moving ceremony, which began with a traditional performance by the Pacific Island Singing Group, brought many people's emotions to the surface, from tears to expressions of frustration, and culled hopes of progress toward human and civil rights for the trans movement.

Lori Buckwalter, It's Time, Oregon! executive director, said in her dramatic remarks: "Loni died in a terrible act of hate, and the senseless brutality that ended her life is still incomprehensible to us. How could this happen to such a gentle soul? Now we see that acts of hatred and terror occur before our very eyes in the light of day, and the world seems to have lost its senses. All those dreams lost, all those bright futures stolen away, for what? The fear and vulnerability that some of us have felt for a long time can now be better understood by many others. Those of us who are transgendered know what fear is like. We live with it every day."

Among those in attendance were Portland Police Chief Mark Kroeker and Assistant Chief Mark Paresi.

"I put the collective sorrow of two officers that were killed south of Salem, and this terrific hate crime that took place in New York and

Washington, and this hate crime, of a young person who was singled out and murdered for a specific reason that had to do with gender transition," Kroeker said. "I think what emerges with me is the universal flame of life that needs to burn. It's never OK to kill people. To me, being here tonight is something I can do to say we think it's abhorrent and to set the example for my police department that acts of bias—even insulting acts of bias, let alone assaulting

community, and we will speak out against this hateful murder," Keeley said. "We must continue to advance the forces of social justice and civil liberties and to foster our belief in the capacities of human beings."

Multnomah County Commissioner Serena Cruz, a longtime and eloquent supporter of human rights for all, agreed. "This event was a tremendous show of support for the trans community in Portland. It gave us a chance to rec-

ognize Loni for her life and remember no one should ever be murdered for being trans."

Drag queen Misha Rockefeller added: "This is about making people understand that someone's life was snuffed out. I'm just so outraged by it. By educating people, hopefully we can get to the point that everyone will be outraged by it."

Washington County Commissioner Dick Shouten, his eyes tinged with sadness, said, "I'm here to show solidarity and to let people know by my presence that we don't have any tolerance for hate crimes in Washington County." MariaLena Palacios of the Mariana Islands Association, wearing a pretty tropical green traditional dress, spoke with great emotion: "On behalf of the family of Loni Okaruru and the Northern Marianas community here in Oregon, I would like to extend a sincere appreciation to the coalition for putting together this vigil, to those organizations who cared enough not to let her death be just another tragedy." Perhaps the trans people and their personal stories made the most moving expressions during the vigil, because their experiences mirror Okaruru's in many ways. Curtis Rudd of Basic Rights Oregon deeply affected the crowd during his speech.

"My name is Curtis," he said. "I am known by other names as well, some of them chosen names, some are given. When someone calls me 'he,' I feel the person speaking has taken the time to honor my gender. We live in a world where many trans people can't get jobs or apartments, where the most mundane aspects of daily life, like buying groceries or going to the doctor, are ordeals requiring tremendous courage and commitment. When I read the coverage of Loni's death, the mainstream papers consistently referred to her by male pronouns and gendered words such as 'men' and 'male.' I was personally insulted."

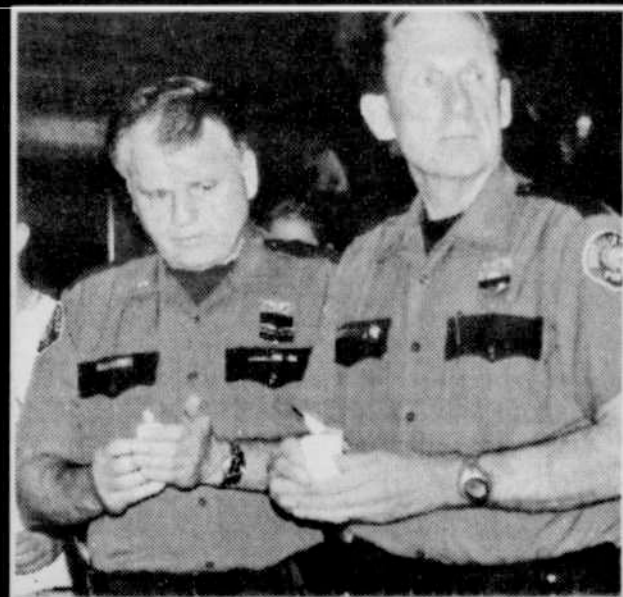
Commenting on why trans people feel the need to make these significant changes in their lives, speaker Tyler reported that a friend once said: "I didn't transition to pass. I transitioned so that when I look in the mirror, I see the same person I see when I close my eyes."

At one point during the event, a nameless passerby admitted: "I just happened upon this. I didn't intend to be here. I felt drawn in when I saw the candles and when I heard the speeches. I had no idea that people live with this kind of stuff. And what happened in New York. It's just unbelievable."

She lit a cigarette, leaned back and slowly shook her head. [7]



Members of the Saipanese community listen to speakers during the vigil; right, Portland Police Assistant Chief Mark Paresi and Chief Mark Kroeker show their support even though the hate crime occurred outside their jurisdiction



acts, let alone murderous acts—are never to be tolerated. Otherwise, we disintegrate into the abyss. And I didn't come here to make a speech; I came to show my personal support."

Paresi added: "Whether it is one person or 10,000 people, the same thing is at the base of this. It's hate. We as a people need to realize that it doesn't take 10,000 people dead and injured for us to fight hate."

Patricia Keeley said the West County Coalition for Human Dignity is planning a Community Rally Against Hate so people in Hillsboro also can recognize Okaruru. The event will begin at 5 p.m. Oct. 7 in front of the Washington County Courthouse.

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Contributions for the LONI OKARURU MEMORIAL FUND may be made by writing to Bank of America, Hillsboro Banking Center, 409 E. Main St., Hillsboro, OR 97123, or by visiting any local branch.

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