

A friendship shares a path to different lives, shared values

In the early 1990s, while Aimee Santos-Lyons was at the University of Philippines, she developed a deep friendship that would continue until today.

His name is George, and Aimee described, "We instantly fell in love and knew that we would always be there for each other."

In 2000, both Aimee and George immigrated to the United States. Aimee made her new home in Portland while George landed in New York City. Aimee and George were having very different experiences based on their identities. She, a straight woman, married her partner and became a citizen. George, gay and undocumented, found no easy path toward citizenship. George relied on the underground economy where he became a sex worker and contracted HIV.

A couple years ago, George's HIV infection developed into AIDS. "I was afraid for him," said Aimee. "Knowing what George has to go through is why I am committed to the success of our Uniting Communities project. I want to leverage my privilege as a straight immigrant to advocate for better protection for all people regardless of their identity, status and nationality."

Aimee was surprised that George feels isolated in New York City, a place with a plethora of organizations who have done important historical work and activism in immigrant rights and gay rights. "The fact

that George feels so excluded by both those movements tells me that these movements don't intersect, don't interface, don't recognize their shared constituencies and common ground."

Aimee has been working to carve this space for marginalized communities for more than 20 years, beginning in her native Philippines. She was raised in a strict Catholic household in the projects of Manila surrounded by poverty, crime and drugs. While she was a high school freshman, she witnessed the People Power revolution in 1986 that opened her eyes to the larger world around her.

At the University of Philippines, a place that Aimee described as a "breeding ground for activists and revolutionaries," she submerged herself in activism through community-based theater. "I was raised as a community organizer by my mentors," Aimee said of her time at university. After graduating from university she started organizing communities to address urban poverty, domestic violence, health care and sexuality that youth faced.

Since 2007, Aimee has helped guide organizations through Western States Center's Uniting Communities project in advancing LGBTQ rights. The goal of Uniting Communities is to support organizations of color to recognize the multiple identities of their members and to begin taking a stand on LGBTQ equality.

"To build common ground and create a space where everyone has a voice and feels included and valued. This is the foundation of my work," said Aimee. "Being excluded and invisible is one of the worst feelings

that can happen to someone."

"I love the work I do through Uniting Communities, and the way we do it at the Center. We are intentional and committed to do transformative work that has lasting ripple effects. In the end, we want to produce better organizations, programming and policies."

Throughout Oregon, Uniting Communities has supported 10 organizations based in communities of color to integrate LGBTQ equality into their existing work. Earlier this year, the Center expanded the project beyond Oregon. The Center also works with the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, National Latina Institute for Reproductive Justice, Mobilize the Immigrant Vote in California and Greater Birmingham Ministries in Alabama.

Aimee's contribution to the Center and Uniting Communities will help shape a landscape where both George's and Aimee's humanity are respected, regardless of their nationality, sexual orientation or health status. After all, that's what defines justice and equality for all.

To find out more about Uniting Communities and Western States Center, go to: www.WesternStatesCenter.org

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Amy Lam is the Development & Communications Associate at the Western States Center, which aims to build a progressive movement by supporting grassroots organizations. The Center's Uniting Communities project works with organizations based in communities of color to advance LGBTQ equality.



I'm Still Alive

By Fay Kaylius

Last night, a man jumped from punk tower.
He looked older, street
that's a tall fall at 4th and Flanders in Old Town.
I step out to a stack of squad cars.
I'm behind police lines on the wrong side,
the inside
crumpled corpse at my feet.
I thought he got stabbed
maybe by that guy I saw shooting tweek.
Tell tale, no shoes on his feet,
dents on roof of a car parked on the street.
I look deep at the crushed legs,
he's not street anymore.
He canceled it
done and done.
go-ahead
blame society
he must have slipped past the guard of the tower
twisted corpse pushed down on the concrete.
I place an old nail by his feet.
It is all I have,
for he must pay the boatman, Charon,
to get across the River Styx.
People are somber,
excited there's something to see.
A carnal pleasure in these passersby,
we are still alive.
It is that easy just to die.
Comfort in knowing it's that easy to get away
step off a precipice into a beautiful view
taller than the steel bridge.
White rubber gloves,
white plastic sheet goes over a ghost face.
Shoes knocked off, placed on his chest.
His boat pulls away.
Forensic shoots a snap.
Everything's better now
Everything's OK.