

## A chosen family deepens connections to their communities

"For folks whose entire identity and personhood is under attack every day, it is important and very political to stake claim to who they are. It's often the most courageous act anyone can do," said Walidah Imarisha.



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.

To find out more about Uniting Communities and Western States Center, go to [www.WesternStatesCenter.org](http://www.WesternStatesCenter.org)

Walidah was speaking specifically about her adopted brother, Kakamia, but she also meant people in our communities who feel like they cannot be their

whole selves.

Kakamia has the ability to be all parts of himself: black, Puerto Rican, Irish, bisexual, a visual artist, an organizer, a California state prisoner and a poet. His capacity to embrace the complex identities of others he meets without judgment, has inspired Walidah politically and personally.

As a young woman of color, Walidah's experiences with high school shaped her understanding of racial justice. It was a hostile environment, where students of color were pushed down the stairs and told to "go back to where they came from." At the time, Walidah didn't understand why it was happening; her political awakening began when she searched for answers.

Walidah's first political march was in support of Mumia Abu-Jamal, an award-winning journalist, lifetime community organizer, and prisoner in Pennsylvania's death row. His supporters, including Walidah, believe he should be set free. She found that Mumia's case touched on many social justice issues and it ignited her interest in examining the prison system.

At the same time, Walidah stumbled upon an ad in the San Francisco Bay View, a political Black newspaper. It advertised Afrocentric and radical artwork done by a young California prisoner. Walidah wrote a letter to this individual, Kakamia, inquiring about his work, and it changed her life. "I always like to say I mail-ordered myself a brother," she laughed.

"The connections Kakamia and I don't have in blood, we make up for in ink," said Walidah. As artists and poets, Walidah and Kakamia used their words to commune with one another. Their bond grew so deep, the

two adopted each other as sister and brother five years after their first letter.

In 2000, Walidah moved to Philadelphia and started organizing there. Her work began to explore the multiple layers of identity, and the way that oppressions intersect for people of color. She helped found the Human Rights Coalition, with a group of prisoners' families and ex-prisoners aimed at supporting prison organizing, empowering prisoners' family members, and ultimately abolishing the prison system.

During her time with the HRC, one of the members, an older black woman whose son was incarcerated, learned of abuse happening to a transgendered prisoner of color, and wanted the group to organize around it. Walidah was apprehensive about the response from the other members, as they never had a discussion on sexual or gender identity as a group. Yet the group was overwhelmingly supportive, and Walidah learned a very important organizing lesson: never underestimate our communities.

She also had insight on the multiple disparities and oppressions that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) people of color often face, and recognized that there were few organizations for them to turn to. These experiences helped Walidah to shape the intersectional lens that impacts her work to this day, especially in the Uniting Communities project.

Walidah feels that Kakamia's strength and his ability to build community and organize under the worst of situations — from a prison cell — have helped inspire her organizing work in the almost two decades they have known one another. "His energy is really like the energy that Uniting Communities is working to embody, seeing people as whole human beings, not making someone choose one part of themselves and check the rest at the door," Walidah explained.

Since 2010, Walidah Imarisha has been a trainer and organizer at the Western States Center and works on the Uniting Communities project. The goal of Uniting Communities is to raise up the experiences, needs and leadership of LGBTQ people of color in organizations and communities of color. Walidah pointed out the importance of a project like Uniting Communities

because "this is our community, this is our issue; we are not just being allies. This is the work of organizing and empowering our communities."

"There is also the idea that communities of color are more aggressively homophobic, and sometimes our communities internalize this idea as well. It's really important to have organizations and leaders stand up to break this myth," said Walidah. "We recently conducted an eye-opening set of interviews with more than 40 leaders of color in Portland, and overwhelmingly, the leaders said they would support LGBTQ equality—but no one has ever asked for their support. This is inspiring and important to remember for the UC project and for all of our work."

Uniting Communities has already supported 10 organizations in Oregon to raise up the needs, experiences and

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leadership of LGBTQ people of color in their existing program work. Earlier this year, the Center expanded the project beyond Oregon; the Center now work with the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health, Mobilize the Immigrant Vote in California and Greater Birmingham Ministries in Alabama.

Uniting Communities strives to build a culture of inclusiveness so that no one is left out. In providing support for Uniting Communities, Walidah feels Kakamia constantly teaches her the most important lesson of all for an organizer. "His outlook always has been 'Just come as you are. Whatever your issues, your problems, we'll work it out when you get here.' That's what making a community is about."

