R.I.P. Kiara St. James, Influential Advocate

She helped to secure pro-trans laws in New York state.

August 17, 2026 By Eva Lorenz

Kiara St. James, an influential HIV and LGBTQ activist in New York, died of cancer May 8, 2026, according to Gay City News.

She was instrumental in getting various pro-transgender laws passed in the state, including the Gender Expression Non-Discrimination Act (GENDA); she was also cofounder and executive director of the New York Transgender Advocacy Group (NYTAG).

“Kiara St. James was a champion for the LGBTQ+ community,” noted New York Governor Kathy Hochul in a post on X acknowledging her death. “The founder of the New York Transgender Advocacy Group, Kiara played a vital role in making New York’s historic Gender Expression Non-Discrimination Act a reality. I was proud to know her and to fight alongside her. She will be dearly missed.”

St. James was born in Beaumont, Texas, and was raised in an evangelical Christian community, where her gender expression was condemned. After years of mistreatment, at age 11, she was placed with a foster family in Heidelberg, Germany. In a 2017 interview for the NYC Trans Oral History Project, St. James detailed how her upbringing and adulthood in New York City in the ’90s informed her activism and advocacy as a Black trans woman.

St. James was an early advocate for trans people of color, pushing for the passage of the 2002 Sexual Orientation Non-Discrimination Act, which prohibited discrimination on the basis of actual or perceived sexual orientation, and its eventual expansion in the form of GENDA, which passed in 2019. GENDA protects gender identity and gender expression under New York state’s human rights law, prohibiting discrimination in employment, housing, public schools and more. It enhanced penalties for and expanded the definition of hate crimes to include offenses against an individual’s gender identity or expression.

St. James also advocated for the repeal of the “walking while trans law,” which was overturned in 2021. First introduced in 1976, the New York City ordinance outlawed “loitering for the purpose of engaging in prostitution” and led to the disproportionate harassment and arrest of trans women of color.

St. James, an advocate for the HIV community before she learned she herself was living with the virus, was one of the few Black, queer people involved in ACT UP in the South during her early adulthood. In 2014, St. James cofounded NYTAG.

The grassroots nonprofit builds community leaders and advocates for gender-inclusive policies and improved access to healthcare for transgender people.

In 2019, the National AIDS Memorial’s Surviving Voices oral history project highlighted the experience of trans women living with HIV; the project includes an interview with St. James, which can be viewed on YouTube.

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