



R.I.P. Kiara St. James, Influential Transgender and HIV Advocate in New York

“Kiara St. James was a champion for the LGBTQ+ community,” said Governor Hochul about the Black transgender activist’s accomplishments.

May 21, 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.”

PWN-USA mourns the passing of Kiara St. James. Some knew her as the co-founding Executive Director of NYTAG & a leading voice in passing GENDA. More than this, she was our sister. Whatever your experience of Kiara, you knew she was a star. Whenever we think of her, we’ll look to the sky.

[\[image or embed\]](#)

— PWN-USA ([@pwnusa.bsky.social](#)) [May 14, 2026 at 4:25 PM](#)

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 transgender women living with HIV; the project includes an [interview with St. James](#), which you can watch at the top of this article and on YouTube.

In 2019, St. James was honored in the [POZ 100](#); that year, the list celebrated transgender, gender-non-conforming and nonbinary advocates. A year later, she made [City & State's 2020 Pride Power 100 list](#) as one of the most influential figures in New York's LGBTQ community. New York City advocates mourned her loss and remembered her life on social media.

In a Facebook Post, the New York City Commission on Gender Equity wrote:

“We mourn the passing of Kiara St. James, a CGE Commission Member and a fierce advocate, visionary leader, and trailblazer for transgender rights and dignity in New York City and beyond.

As the Founder and Executive Director of the New York Transgender Advocacy Group (NYTAG), Kiara dedicated her life to uplifting Black and Brown trans communities, advancing culturally affirming policies, and creating opportunities for transgender and gender-nonconforming New Yorkers. Her advocacy helped shape historic progress, including the passage of GENDA and efforts to end discriminatory practices impacting the trans community.

Kiara led with courage, authenticity, and deep compassion. She spoke truth to power, fought for those too often left unheard, and inspired countless people through her leadership and unwavering commitment to justice and equity.

Her legacy will continue to live on through the communities she empowered, the lives she changed, and the movement she helped build.

Rest in power, Kiara.”



[View this post on Instagram](#)

A post shared by The NEW Pride Agenda (@newprideagenda)

NEW Pride Agenda wrote on Instagram:

“NEW Pride Agenda is heartbroken by the passing of Kiara St. James—a founder and a true architect of trans liberation. Kiara was a force who built New York Trans Advocacy Group (NYTAG), frontlined the effort to pass the Gender Express Non-Discrimination Act (GENDA) and the Repeal of Walking While Trans Ban, and helped advocate for the Lorena Borjas Trans Wellness and Equity Fund. She has left her fingerprints on every win in our community.

Even as recent as last year’s historic victory of achieving a near \$14M investment in LGBTQ+ communities at the city-level—the doubling of the Trans Equity Initiative to \$6.5M, the first expansion since its founding—Kiara was present to keep BIPOC and Trans leaders center in all considerations.

She reminded us of the work that took us from pizza parties and MetroCards to organizations with staff and offices. She always centered the trans experience and paid it forward in her grounded guidance and community memory.

She was a colleague and a sister to the NEW Pride Agenda in the deepest sense of the word, and we carry her legacy forward. Every barrier our movement breaks down, every dollar we secure, every young trans person who finds their way to New York—is because of the infrastructure Kiara helped build.

Rest in Power, Kiara.”



[View this post on Instagram](#)

A post shared by Callen-Lorde Community Health (@callenlorde)

A leader in LGBTQ healthcare, Callen-Lorde wrote about St. James's death on Instagram:

"We are deeply saddened to learn about the passing of visionary leader and organizer Kiara St. James.

As the founder of the New York Transgender Advocacy Group ([@nytransadvocacygroup](#)) Kiara's impact on our community was singular. She was essential in the passing of New York State's Gender Expression Nondiscrimination Act (GENDA) and her work focused not only on how to survive the community's present challenges, but how trans and nonbinary people could thrive in the future.

Her legacy is present in every moment her mission is realized: when the most marginalized among us can access safe housing, comprehensive healthcare and the right to a good quality of life. We are indebted to her and send our condolences to her friends, family, and coworkers.

Rest in power Kiara. We are holding our NYTAG family close during this time."

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.

<http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/rip-kiara-st-james-influential-transgender-hiv-advocate-new-york>