R.I.P. Lorena Borjas, a Transgender Latinx Activist Lost to COVID-19

Watch an inspiring video about the beloved New Yorker who operated HIV-testing programs and syringe exchanges for people taking hormones.

March 31, 2020 By Trent Straube

Lorena Borjas, a pioneering and much-loved advocate for the transgender and immigrant communities in New York City, died of COVID-19, the disease caused by novel coronavirus, reports NY1.com. She was 60.

She helped organize one of the first transgender marches in the city and fought tirelessly for her communities, operating HIV-testing programs and syringe exchanges and fighting to change police policies toward trans people and sex workers.

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Early this morning prominent trans Latinx activist Lorena Borjas returned to her ancestors after passing

away from #COVID19. May her journey be filled with light and joy for all that she did on behalf of the

community. ❤#RestInPower

A post shared by Princess Janae Place (@princessjanaeplace) on Mar 30, 2020 at 6:23am PDT

“She specialized in helping transgender immigrant sex workers, who are often the target of hate crimes…who are often shunned by society. And she was their voice…someone strong and in the forefront and always helping to lift them up and raise money for them,” Jim Burke, an activist, told NY1.com.

Borjas immigrated from Mexico in 1981 in order to transition to living as a woman. She made Queens, New York, her home.



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We are saddened to learn that our dear friend and colleague, Lorena Borjas, passed today to COVID-19

related complications. It goes without saying that we are proud that Lorena, a legendary organizer and

champion for LGBTQ+ services, found her home with us at CHN. What we will miss most is how generous

she was with her boisterous, raspy laughs, her colorful wardrobe, how passionate she was about

championing the rights of our patients, specifically our trans and immigrant populations, and how tireless

she was in her efforts both with us and in the community. We will miss you, Lorena. Your impact here will

forever remain. #LorenaBorjas

A post shared by Community Healthcare Network (@chnnyc) on Mar 30, 2020 at 12:58pm PDT

After surviving sex trafficking and abuse—and being arrested for prostitution in the 1990s—she became an advocate for others in similar situations.

Because of her past convictions, Borjas was unable to become a citizen and faced deportation. In 2017, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo pardoned her. Borjas was profiled in an inspiring segment by Queens Public Television that you can watch below.

Borjas was the founder and CEO of Colectivo Intercultural TRANSgrediendo, an intercultural collective that focuses on trans communities, which addressed the abuse and lack of representation many trans people face.

“A gigantic loss for our trans and diverse Hispanic/Latinx communities,” said Guillermo Chacon, president of the Latino Commission on AIDS and founder of Hispanic Health Network, in a statement. “Lorena was a wonderful human being. She will be missed tremendously by all of us who had the chance to know her and the pioneering work she did to secure support services for our communities and addressing injustices in immigration, stigma and discrimination.”

Lorena Borjas, center, received the Fuerza Award from the Latino Commission on AIDS in 2019. Next to her are George Fesser and Daniela Simba.Courtesy of Latino Commission on AIDS

Last year, the Latino Commission on AIDS honored Borjas with its Fuerza Award, which honors those who have fought for HIV-related services, research and medical treatment and prevention. The same year, she was also honored by Iris House for her HIV advocacy.

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Perdimos a la transfeminista latina #LorenaBorjas a la batalla contra COVID-19. Ella hizo un trabajo increíble en nuestra comunidad para las mujeres transgénero y las trabajadoras sexuales. Que descanse en paz y poder. We lost my friend, Latina transfeminist Lorena Borjas to the battle against COVID-19. She did an amazing job in our community for transgender women and sex workers. May she rest in peace and power.

A post shared by Jessica Ramos (@__jessicaramos__) on Mar 30, 2020 at 8:52am PDT

In related news, Tuesday, March 31, marks International Transgender Day of Visibility. Last week, the LGBT and Broadway communities lost playwright Terrence McNally to COVID-19.

Go to poz.com/tag/coronavirus for our continuing coverage of COVID-19.

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