R.I.P. Urvashi Vaid, LGBTQ and AIDS Activist, Attorney and Leader

A vocal and respected LGBTQ author and advocate, Urvashi Vaid also championed HIV issues during the early AIDS epidemic.

May 27, 2022 By Trent Straube

Tributes and obituaries continue to praise Urvashi Vaid, the activist, author and attorney who championed LGBTQ and HIV/AIDS issues for more than three decades. Vaid died of cancer on May 14, 2022, at her home in New York City. She was 63.

“We are devastated at the loss of one of the most influential progressive activists of our time,” Kierra Johnson, executive director of the National LGBTQ Task Force, told the Washington Blade. Vaid helmed the task force from 1989 to 1992.

“Urvashi Vaid was a leader, a warrior and a force to be reckoned with,” Johnson added, “She was also a beloved colleague, friend, partner and someone we all looked up to—a brilliant, outspoken and deeply committed activist who wanted full justice and equality for all people.”

> Urvashi Vaid is dead. You cannot talk about LGBTQ rights in America without her. She was a fearless leader and thinker. Here she is in 1990 interrupting remarks on AIDS by then President Bush. She is an icon, a pillar of our history, we owe her everything.
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> pic.twitter.com/4w71s0rPnw
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> — Gregg Gonsalves (@gregggonsalves) May 15, 2022

“You cannot talk about LGBTQ rights in America without [Vaid]. She was a fearless leader and thinker,” AIDS activist and Yale epidemiologist Gregg Gonsalves tweeted about her legacy, adding, “She is an icon, a pillar of our history, we owe her everything.”

“I lost a hero and a mentor,” wrote AIDS activist and author Peter Staley on Facebook, in a post that included a clip of Vaid and Richard Deagle heckling President George H.W. Bush. “Can you imagine a leader of one of our national gay rights groups heckling a president?” Staley wrote about the clip. “I can, but only in distant memories. While the A-gays predictably applauded Bush’s ‘I can understand the concern that these people feel,’ Urvashi Vaid’s sign said, ‘REMEMBER GAY PEOPLE WITH AIDS.’ During his 19-minute speech on AIDS, Bush never mentioned gay people at all. Hearing no new programs announced, Urv heckles Bush a second time at the very end of the speech.”

Born in New Delhi, Vaid moved to New York with her family in 1966, reports NPR. She began her career as a staff lawyer with the American Civil Liberties Union and led many advocacy, academic and philanthropic organizations, including the Arcus Foundation. For several decades, Vaid and her partner, comedian Kate Clinton, were regulars at fundraisers and protests and on the media.

In 1991, she was named The Advocate’s Woman of the Year, notes NPR of her many accomplishments. In 1996, her book Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation won a Stonewall Book Award. In 2009, Out magazine named her one of the 50 most influential men and women in America.

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