Black Sex Workers' History Is Black History

It's also AIDS history. When the virus struck in the 1980s, Black activists for sex workers' rights created HIV education and outreach programs.

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In 1984, an American sex workers' rights activist named Gloria Lockett observed that, as soon as people stopped scapegoating gay men for transmitting HIV, the next group would be sex workers.

Lockett is a Black woman who, at that time, had been supporting her family as a sex worker for more than a decade. Sex workers rights were starting to gain traction, and Lockett was in the thick of this work in San Francisco. In 1982, she met Margo St. James, Carol Leigh and Pricilla Alexander — three white women also mobilizing loudly for sex workers rights. Together they held "Bad Girls Rap Groups," informal weekly discussions open to "any woman who has ever been stigmatized as bad for her work, color, class, sexuality, history of abuse or just plain gender." Mobilizing together, they raised vocal, public demand for sex workers' liberation.

Their growing movement was inspired by the East Coast's Stonewall Rebellion, an uprising of New York sex workers and LGBTQ activists who, outraged by endless police brutality and extortion, fought the police in the streets for six days, demanding their rights.

A West Coast parallel event was triggered in 1978 when Harvey Milk, the first openly gay member of San Francisco's Board of Supervisors, was assassinated in broad daylight. Like their counterparts, sex workers and LGBTQ people reacted with deep outrage, rioting and refusing to back down until their public demands for equal treatment and respect were met. Some progress resulted, but as always, white men benefitted most by the changes and Black women — particularly Black women who traded in sex — benefitted the least. Nevertheless, pride parades and pride culture became fierce emblems of the joyous, determined, sex-positive movement created by "whores and queers" on the coasts and spreading elsewhere.

St. James, with Lockett, Alexander, Leigh and others, established COYOTE (Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics), an organization demanding the decriminalization of prostitution. Many of them also later came together to create St. James Infirmary, a source of medical and social services for sex workers that still flourishes today.

Leigh, known as the "Scarlet Harlot," is an artist and activist most commonly known for replacing the term "prostitutes" with "sex worker" in common language. Alexander established and co-edits

“Sex Works: Writings by Women in the Sex Industry,” a periodical still in public circulation.

This evolving culture was suddenly shattered, however, with the onset of HIV & AIDS, crushing this new, sex-positive environment and killing many leaders who contributed to building it.

Lockett’s 1984 prediction became horribly true. Black communities and Black sex workers, along with gay men of all races and ethnicities, were widely blamed for AIDS. Reagan’s administration refused to even mention AIDS until 1987.

Lockett, however, responded immediately by creating CAL-PEP, the California Prostitutes Education Project. Without shame or evasion, CAL-PEP announced that “our initial focus was prostitutes and their sexual partners including transgender individuals” — making it one of the first organizations in the U.S. to provide HIV education, prevention and street outreach.

In a tiny office in Oakland, with no money and little assistance, Lockett persuaded the California Health Department to fund her to develop HIV education materials appropriate for people in her area. To ensure acceptability, she gathered community feedback on materials explaining the new health crisis. Once approved, she translated her resulting data back into “health department terms” and then asked for more resources to expand further. In its first year, CAL-PEP survived entirely on one $30,000 state health department grant.

Thirty-five years later, in May 2019, she retired from serving 35 years as CAL-PEP’s executive director. Her staff had grown to 20 people, and the organization’s budget had grown to $2.2 million in revenue. CAL-PEP’s mission is “to provide tailored health education, disease prevention, risk reduction and support services to people at highest risk for HIV/AIDS in a language that they understand.”

What if Lockett had not decided in 1984 to respond as she did?

Historical events usually focus on those who died for a cause, not those who have lived through their extraordinary acts to see their success. Of the CAL-PEP recipients now, 20% are sex workers, 83% are African American, 8% are Latinx and 1% are Asian -Pacific Islander. For 35 years, they have known that CAL-PEP speaks their languages and can help them. Some people inspire us by living for their cause. Gloria Lockett is one, and we celebrate her legacy this Black History Month.

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