Highlighting Our Resilience on Transgender Day of Remembrance

I used to opt out of TDOR, which is marked this Tuesday, November 20. But no longer.

November 19, 2018 By AIDS United

The following post is from Kiara St. James, cofounder and executive director of New York Transgender Advocacy Group, a grantee of AIDS United's Transgender Leadership Initiative.

For many years, I opted out of attending any Transgender Day of Remembrance (TDOR) events that I was invited to. I found myself being triggered and feeling fatalistic for many days afterward due to the violence-centered lens that this day is known for.

One of the last TDOR events I went to had a Christmas tree with what, from a distance, looked like colorful ornaments. As I approached it, I could see the ornaments had pictures with paragraphs on them. Upon closer inspection, the narratives were about community members who met their end in very violent and brutal ways. The stories included people being left to die by EMT workers; being shot in the back of the head while running away; having their throat slit and stumbling across the street with blood gushing out while people watched; being battered to death with a hammer; and being stabbed over 50 times in the face, neck, and lower torso.

After about 10 minutes of reading how so many transgender/gender nonconforming (TGNC) community members around the world met their end in such gruesome scenarios, I felt numb. And I was haunted by the questions I think many Trans women in particular have when we leave these events: Why even bother living? What hope is there for me, especially as a Black Trans woman, when at any moment a smile, an innocent glance towards a fragile masculine ego, or looking at an insecure cis woman can lead to a violent conclusion?

So for many years I removed myself from TDOR or any Trans spaces.

That changed when I heard of the violent death of Islan Nettles, a young African American Woman of Trans experience who was killed across the street from a Harlem police precinct. Her death galvanized me and so many others into action. I remember talking to many of my sisters who attended a rally for her, a rally that was also attended by many elected officials, about how we needed to meet to discuss how we could address violence toward our community members.

Among those amazing Goddesses in attendance at one of our very first convenings were Janet Mock and Laverne Cox, who gave of their time to assist in strategies for our survival. After we

started meeting, we were invited to many events, especially around TDOR. I accepted many speaking engagements — but with a clause that, while it was important to highlight the global violence being waged against TGNC folks nationally and across the globe, we must be intentional in how we not only honor our fallen, but how we uplift, affirm, and empower our living.

How we hold space on this day must also be about how we tap into our Kick-Ass Resilience!

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