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Transphobia and mean streets

By Michael Munson And Loree Cook-Daniels

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On May 7, 2010, Chanel (Dana) Larkin, 26, was fatally shot in the head by Andrew Olaciregui, 28, who had met her on a Milwaukee street and asked her to engage in a sexual act. Olaciregui pleaded guilty to second-degree reckless homicide in the case on Aug. 31, according to the state's online court database. He is scheduled to be sentenced in October.

Although commercial sex work is a notoriously dangerous profession, it would be a mistake to dismiss this death so simply. For Larkin also belonged to another demographic group with an outrageously high early fatality rate: She was an African-American transgender woman.

The National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs (NCAVP) is a coalition of 40 U.S. nonprofits that work with lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) victims of violence and police misconduct. In its 2009 Hate Crimes report, NCAVP documented 22 murders caused by anti-LGBT prejudice. Of those 22, half were transgender women.

Of the remainder, most were biologically male but dressed femininely with an unknown gender identity but who were dressed femininely or were otherwise gender non-conforming when they were killed, therefore making it likely that the vast majority of murder victims were gender variant.

Furthermore, 79% of the victims were people of color. Larkin's murder may have been relatively unusual for Milwaukee, but it fits an alarming national pattern, down to its timing: Milwaukee's 2010 PrideFest was June 11 to 13, barely four weeks after Larkin's death. Nationally, 55% of 2009's documented anti-LGBT murders took place in a 14-week period that includes most cities' LGBT Pride celebrations, when LGBT people are most visible.

Larkin's commercial sex work was likely related to both her race and her gender identity. African-Americans still face rampant racism, economic discrimination and educational neglect. A 2001 national study found that Wisconsin had the country's lowest African-American high school graduation rate, at 40%. A 2005 study showed that the top three reasons for verbal or physical harassment in schools are appearance, sexual orientation and gender identity. Obviously, young African-American gender variant students are clearly at high risk of bullying or worse in schools and consequently are highly likely to leave school without graduating.

Like many of her peers, Larkin did not have a GED. She also had been unable to afford to legally change her name and ID. Therefore, even though she clearly looked female, whenever she applied for job and was asked for identification, she would have had to explain why it said she was male and had a

different first name.

Employment discrimination against transgender people - while technically illegal in many places, including Milwaukee - is rampant. A recent national study of 6,450 transgender people found that 97% had been harassed or mistreated at work, and 47% had been fired, not hired, or denied a promotion because they were known to be transgender.

African-American transgender people were twice as likely to be unemployed (26%) as were other participants in this pre-recession survey. Since it doesn't require a GED or ID, commercial sex work makes sense to many young African-American transwomen. Unless or until a client learns you are transgender. Then you're at high risk of joining the NCAVP and Transgender Day of Remembrance murder victims lists.

Here, too, widespread social attitudes play a role. Many transwomen are killed during or right after sexual acts or sexual negotiations, by someone they've just met. The man may think, "If I had sex with a woman who turns out to have a penis or was born male, am I gay?" Some people's homophobia is so strong that they apparently prefer to become a murderer rather than be thought of as gay. And so they "reclaim their manhood" by killing the person who "deceived" them.

Racism. Homophobia. Transphobia. Discrimination. Legal, financial and medical barriers to changing your name, ID, and/or your body to match who you are in the world. All of these contribute to the loss of vibrant people like Larkin, people who are valued and much-loved and who are active members of their communities.

At her funeral, dozens spoke of Chanel's love, Chanel's smile, Chanel's humor, Chanel's care. She was a leader in Sisters Helping Each Other Battle AIDS (SHEBA), a program of Diverse and Resilient, where she had been active for years. She took care of friends and community members. And now she is gone.

We need to work to make sure no more Chanels are lost to a fatal mix of prejudices. We need to root out homophobia and transphobia and racism wherever they exist so that people can be educated and employed in peace. We need to educate employers, protect schoolchildren, help people earn their GEDs and make it simpler for people to get ID that matches who they are.

Most of all, we need to care about people like Larkin as much as she cared about others.

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