



## Rivera, Sylvia (1951-2002)

by Andrew Matzner

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Sylvia Rivera interviewed by Randy Wicker. Still from a YouTube video by Randy Wicker.

A legendary veteran of the Stonewall Riots (June 27-29, 1969), Sylvia Rivera is notable for helping to spark the event that ushered in the modern-day Gay Rights Movement. Indeed, Rivera spent most of her life at the forefront of both transgender and gay activism, tirelessly advocating and demonstrating for glbtq rights and inclusive social policies. At the same time, Rivera also struggled against and drew attention to the transphobia that continues to exist within the larger gay and lesbian community.

Born Rey Rivera Mendoza on July 2, 1951, Rivera left home at eleven years of age. She made her way to New York City's Times Square and began working in female drag as a prostitute. Through the 1960s she survived on the streets, and in the process learned firsthand of the dangers and social injustices faced by gender-variant people (such as drag queens, butch lesbians, and transsexuals).

On June 27, 1969, Rivera was in the crowd that gathered outside the Stonewall Inn after word spread that it had been raided by police. The sight of arrested patrons being led from the bar by authorities riled the crowd, but it was Rivera who threw one of the first Molotov cocktails that actually initiated the riots and sent Stonewall into the history books.

In 1970 Rivera joined the Gay Activists Alliance (GAA) and worked on its campaign to pass the New York City Gay Rights Bill. She attracted media attention when she attempted to force her way into closed-door sessions concerning the bill held at City Hall. In spite of Rivera's (and other drag queens') participation in the GAA, the organization decided to exclude transgender rights from the Gay Rights Bill so that it would be more acceptable to straight politicians.

Rivera was shocked and betrayed by this decision. She also became disillusioned with the gay rights movement in general and dismayed by the backlash against drag queens that had developed by the mid-1970s.

Perhaps already sensing that transgendered people could not rely on the gay rights movement to advocate for their civil rights, in 1970 Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson had formed a group called Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (S.T.A.R.). The members of this organization aimed to fight for the civil rights of transgendered people, as well as provide them with social services support.

At this time, Rivera and Johnson began operating S.T.A.R. House in the East Village, which provided housing for poor transgendered youth. S.T.A.R. House lasted for two years, but was then closed because of financial and zoning problems. Although in existence only a short time, S.T.A.R. House is historically significant because it was the first institution of its kind in New York City, and inspired the creation of future shelters for homeless street queens.

In the late 1970s Rivera left New York City and ended her deep involvement in glbtq activism. She moved to Tarrytown, New York, where she began a career with the Marriott Corporation as a food services manager. After maintaining a stable lifestyle for over a decade, Rivera was forced to leave her job because of

substance abuse problems in the early 1990s.

She returned to New York City, but did not have enough money for housing. For several years Rivera lived on the Christopher Street piers, and became part of a community of homeless queer people. In 1997 she was able to move into the Transy House Collective in Park Slope, Brooklyn. This house, run by transgendered people, was based on the S.T.A.R. House model. In her new home, Rivera provided support for transgender youth.

In the late 1990s, Rivera resumed her political activism, and involved herself in advocating for both glbtq and homeless rights. In 2000, she and other transgender activists reformed S.T.A.R. (now slightly renamed as the Street Transgender Action Revolutionaries). Under Rivera's direction, the group pressured the Human Rights Campaign to be more inclusive of transgender people, and fought (unsuccessfully) for the inclusion of gender identity in New York State's non-discrimination legislation.

In her early 50s, Rivera developed liver cancer. The disease greatly affected her strength and mobility, yet she continued her social activism and political lobbying. Even when hospitalized, Rivera never stopped working for the civil rights of transgendered people. Several hours before she passed away on February 19, 2002 in the intensive care unit of St. Vincent's Hospital in Greenwich Village, Rivera was meeting with glbtq community leaders and pressing for change.

### **Bibliography**

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