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Editorial: Sakia Gunn: Why the silence?

By Trevor Hoppe

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Since the murder of San Francisco Supervisor Harvey Milk in 1978, the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender movement has organized around those who paid the highest price of oppression. Recently, Sakia Gunn joined the steadily growing list of bias crime victims, yet her murder has not received the kind of attention that previous cases have garnered. In looking at the silence surrounding this case, it becomes clear that the LGBTQ community has a great deal of work to do to increase public awareness of bias crime victims.

You're probably not familiar with Gunn's story. For the unfamiliar, Gunn was murdered on May 11 in Newark, N.J. while waiting for the bus. She was a 15-year-old black lesbian who didn't take any flak for her sexuality. After being harassed verbally, she told her murderer that "she wasn't like that"; that she was gay. After approaching and choking one of the young women Gunn was waiting with, suspect Richard McCollough turned on Gunn and, after a brief struggle, allegedly stabbed her in the chest. Gunn was taken to a local hospital where she died from excessive blood loss.

Why then, was this courageous young woman's death not the feature story of every major news publication in America? The case received little newspaper coverage and only slight television news exposure, yet it was just the opposite a few years earlier when the murder of college student Matthew Shepard rocked the nation's televisions and hearts. Of course differences exist between the two cases - Shepard's murder was torturous to a level rarely seen and McCollough turned himself into authorities - but the fact remains that both were victims of bias crimes. Much of the coverage that can be found on Gunn's murder is in LGBTQ-run publications, and even that has been on the slim side. This type of silence is both discouraging and dangerous.

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Sakia Gunn, of course, was no Matthew Shepard. Her experiences as both a racial and sexual minority and as a woman have something to do with the lack of public dialogue. Because of Shepard's white, male, and class privileges he was "supposed" to be less vulnerable as a sexual minority. Yet his privileges failed to protect him - thus the public shock and outrage over his murder. Gunn lacked Shepard's social advantages. To the average American, she was just a black lesbian high school student waiting for the bus on the street corner in downtown Newark - thus the near silence surrounding her death. Who is surprised?

The need to protect LGBTQ youth like Sakia Gunn was a focus at the recent Massachusetts Youth Pride Celebration in Boston. I ventured to the rally and the following festivities at the Hatch Shell hoping to hear some mention of Gunn in remembrance. I realized, however, that since the media wasn't talking about it, no one else was talking about it either. It wasn't just Youth Pride that was silent about Gunn, it was just about everyone: activists, media outlets, and communities outside of Newark. The silence is deafening.

I have spent the better part of the last week negotiating my understanding of her murder as it directly affects me as an LGBTQ community member. I know that on the night of her murder I was dancing to house music in a ritzy club with beautiful gay men to celebrate my birthday. Like Gunn, I was returning home after a party far from home that night. At first I thought our experiences were somehow drastically different (because I was driving myself, I am a gay white male, etc.). But I now know that in distancing myself from her experience, I was cheating myself into a false sense of security; it was a way to convince myself that it couldn't have been me. The truth of the matter is that it could have been me, any of my LGBTQ friends, or any person who transgresses norms of gender and /or sexuality.

Realizing that we are all potential victims of bias crimes is an important step in forming a community. However, once we begin to break down the walls of silence, it is vital that we do not take on the mindset of victims. We must rise above victim status and fight the oppression that we face. In doing so, we must also account for the intersections of privilege within our own community - those of class, ability, race, age, gender, and sexuality. When we say that we are fighting for the rights of gender variants and sexual minorities, we must mean that to include everyone. Any one of us could have been Sakia Gunn, and we cannot afford to forget that shared experience. We cannot afford to be silent about Sakia Gunn.

So what can you do to remember Sakia Gunn? That's the question that has been on the brains of a few Boston-area activists. We're planning something to let you celebrate her life. To find out more, contact Trevor Hoppe at thoppe@nglhf.org to find out how the event is developing.

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