I came to abortion work in a rather circuitous way. It was not expected after seven years of strict Catholic schooling and 21 Thanksgivings full of staunchly conservative, pro-life family debates. By the time I arrived in Seattle, a newly graduated college-educated feminist, I had left all of the conservative Catholicism behind me, but I still did not anticipate that abortion work would become my passion.

I was living in a house with three other newly-graduated feminists, and we were all looking for work at the same time. My housemate learned of an open position in a local abortion clinic and after much thought decided it wasn’t the work for her. The interview fell to me by default.

One moment I was an “I’m pro-choice but I don’t think I would ever have an abortion” feminist, and the next I was counseling women who were terminating their pregnancies. My clinic was special. It was one of the three free-standing facilities in the country at the time that routinely performed abortions well into the 24th week of pregnancy. Yes, we performed the much talked-about, often loathed (even in liberal circles) late-term abortion.

Talking about abortion makes people uncomfortable. Even if you theoretically believe in a woman’s right to choose whether or not she will continue a pregnancy, you probably don’t want to know the details of how that pregnancy will be ended. And, chances are, if you’re one of the millions upon millions of women who have had an abortion (or two or three) you still don’t want to know all of the details.

I know all of the details. I’ve seen thousands of abortions. And watching the Presidential debates last winter I was reminded yet again that we will have no real freedom over the domain of our own bodies until we untangle the rhetorical nonsense both sides throw up instead of discussing the real issues.

Do late-term abortions often end perfectly viable pregnancies? Of course they do. Early abortions end viable pregnancies too, as do miscarriages. But when I hear talk about the “tragedy” of abortion, my skin crawls. We all agree, say the politicians, that the best solution to this problem is to have fewer abortions, period. I don’t agree with them.

I think the only solution is for all of us to become very serious about creating a world where the children who already exist have a decent chance at growing up healthy and in control of their own destiny.
CLPP is dedicated to the leadership development of students and activists. CLPP organizes for advocacy and education around reproductive justice, which is the connection of reproductive health to all social justice causes. These include abortion, contraception, economic justice, racial justice, queer rights, immigrants’ rights, incarceration, sex workers’ rights, HIV/AIDS, and many more.

PROJECTS

**CLPP Community Student Group**
The CLPP student group consists of young activists from the 5 Colleges and broader community who are looking to develop their skills to organize for reproductive and social justice. During the Fall semester, the CLPP student group participates in “Activist 101” trainings, meets weekly to dialogue and discuss current issues, and takes an active role in organizing CLPP events. During the Spring semester, the student group works as the driving force behind the annual reproductive justice conference.

**Annual Reproductive Justice Conference**
CLPP’s annual April conference for students and community activists connects young people to reproductive rights organizations and campaigns locally, nationally, and internationally and provides them with information, analysis, and “how-to” organizing to bring back to their own campuses and communities. The conference presents a broad range of workshops, including: International Reproductive Rights Roundtables, Intersex 101, Abortion Access in the US, Economic Justice in the US, HIV/AIDS: The Urgent Need for Action, Immigrant Rights, Women in Prison, and Youth Activism. Join us this year, April 3-5, 2009!

**Summer Internship Program**
The Reproductive Rights Activist Service Corps (RRASC) is a paid summer internship program that places students from several Western Massachusetts colleges with reproductive rights and social justice organizations in the US and abroad.

**New Leadership Networking Initiative (NLNI)**
NLNI is a training and leadership-building network for young reproductive justice activists. NLNI members work at a wide range of reproductive rights and social justice groups and, through their participation in the network, create new relationships and collaborations that are energizing and expanding the reproductive justice movement.

Contact clpp@hampshire.edu or 413.559.6976 for more info!
A year ago, a 12-year-old boy from Maryland named Deamonte Driver died because his family couldn’t find a dentist willing to accept Medicaid to extract his abscessed tooth.

As you read this, there are approximately 83,000 children in the foster care system in the state of California alone.

In my very short life I have worked with children whose parents locked them in closets for days. I have pulled a young girl out of a crack house where she sat patiently waiting for her mother to get high in the back room. I have counseled hundreds upon hundreds of children and young women who were pregnant because their fathers, brothers, ministers, uncles, boyfriends, some stranger, or a group of strangers raped them.

I am very certain that none of the recent major-party Presidential candidates were qualified to speak about the tragedy of abortion.

Women who terminate in their second trimester often do so because they are uninsured, or their employer-sponsored insurance plans exclude contraception and abortion services. They can’t raise the money for a first trimester abortion, which often means they have to desperately try to borrow money for more expensive second trimester procedures.

Determining the morality of a stranger’s actions is pretty easy when you don’t know the facts. And when it comes to abortion we never want to know the facts. The facts make us squeamish. The facts point us to the truth that while we profess to hold “life” in the highest esteem we do precious little as a culture to ensure the most basic quality of life for our most vulnerable.

I don’t dislike people who are opposed to abortion. Abortion is a very personal decision which in my experience is best left to the woman who has to harbor that pregnancy and spend the rest of her life dealing with its consequences. While many abortion opponents speak of the physical dangers women face when aborting, the truth is that having a first trimester abortion in this country is significantly safer for a woman than carrying that pregnancy to term. And of course, once you decide to carry that pregnancy you have to find a way to pay for it. My very good friend just gave birth to perfect, gorgeous, and much-wanted twin baby girls. The hospital bill for her delivery alone was $80,000.

People who want to get pregnant, and people who want to and decide they are able to be parents face these obstacles, often joyfully. And I support them wholeheartedly. Forcing a woman who does not want to be pregnant or parent to continue her pregnancy amounts to nothing more than another, government-sanctioned, act of violence against her and against her fetus.

I dislike rhetoric and sound bites about abortion offered up by people who don’t know what they’re talking about, and that includes every single politician I’ve ever heard speak on the subject.

Deamonte Driver’s death is an American tragedy.

The crashing, tumbling, increasingly corrupt health care system which benefits the CEO’s of insurance companies and their lobbyists at the expense of the rest of us is an American tragedy.

We need to change the public agenda. We need to talk about quality of life for all of our children.

Abortion is a decision that women from every socio-economic group and every kind of religious and moral background has to face at some point in her life. It is a reality that we do not like to think about. It is a birth control method we don’t speak of in polite conversation. There is evidence of women aborting from the dawn of time, and it isn’t likely to go away any time soon, as long as women fear for their ability to feed their children and keep them safe, and question bringing them into the world.

If our politicians are serious about lowering the number of abortions in this country it would be in their best interest to stop wasting money bombing other women’s children around the world. If we truly wish to cultivate a culture of life in this country, we need to put our money where our rhetoric is. We need a viable universal health care plan. We need financial assistance for single mothers and struggling families instead of Wall Street millionaires. We need to recognize the beauty of all kinds of family structures and stop preventing perfectly loving people from adopting and fostering children because they are single, gay, or otherwise non-nuclear.

I have watched the abortions you don’t want to think about. I have also watched beautiful, brilliant living children subjected to unspeakable horrors that I wish I didn’t have to think about. I’ve seen politicians and ministers and good respectable people question the morality of women who have chosen abortion over failing a child they would have loved dearly.

I haven’t seen any politician reaching out to Deamonte Driver’s mother and apologizing to her for her son’s death. I don’t see us take accountability for the fact that as a nation we fail our children and their families, not to mention the children of the world and their families every single day.

That makes me squeamish. That is immoral. That is a tragedy.
10 REASONS WHY HOMELESSNESS AND INCARCERATION ARE QUEER RIGHTS ISSUES

By Stephen Blake Figura

As part of our DifferenTakes: Ten Reasons series, Stephen Figura provides compelling evidence of why activists for LGBTQ rights should make the homelessness of LGBTQ youth, and the criminalization and incarceration of LGBTQ people of all ages, a top priority.

— Co-editors Elizabeth Barajas-Roman and Betsy Hartmann, the Population and Development Program

Every day, tens of thousands of homeless queer people struggle to find food, shelter, and services. Every day, queer people behind bars face violence, ridicule, and discrimination at the hands of prison guards and fellow inmates. Here are ten reasons we should consider homelessness and incarceration as queer rights issues:

1 Violence at home and school makes LGBTQ youth disproportionately at risk of homelessness on the basis of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

Most studies estimate that LGBTQ youth comprise between 20–40% of homeless youth in the US. This is a gross overrepresentation, considering that only 3–5% of youth identify as LGBTQ. Why do so many of our nation’s LGBTQ youth wind up in shelters and on the streets?

Often the problem begins with their home life. According to the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, one out of every four youth that come out as LGBTQ are met with violence, ridicule, and discrimination by social services and placed in foster care or group home settings.

Abuse and discrimination at school is another common factor forcing many LGBTQ youth onto the streets. In a nationwide survey, 90% of LGBTQ youth reported that they sometimes or frequently hear homophobic slurs in their schools, and more than 1/3 said they heard such remarks from faculty or staff.

A Massachusetts study found that LGBTQ youth are twice as likely to report having been in a fight at school and three times more likely to report having been injured or threatened with a weapon.

Because of this, LGBTQ youth are 4.9 times more likely to have missed a day in school within the last 30 days than their heterosexual peers. Many youth who are targets of anti-LGBTQ violence at school and home may run away, feeling that life on the streets is a safer alternative. Others may become involved in the juvenile justice system due to truancy violations and interpersonal conflicts at school. Youth in the juvenile justice system are far more likely to experience homelessness later in life.

2 Child welfare responses to violence against LGBTQ youth tend to place them in restrictive and unsafe settings.

When removed from abusive home situations, LGBTQ youth run the risk of being placed in environments that are equally or even more abusive. A 1994 study found that a staggering 78% of LGBTQ youth placed in foster care in New York were later removed by the state or ran away due to unwelcoming or hostile responses by foster families toward their sexual orientation or gender identity.

The same study found that 100% of LGBTQ youth placed in New York Administration for Children’s Services group homes were verbally harassed, while 70% reported being targets of physical violence due to their sexual orientation or gender identity.

3 Shelter and services geared specifically toward the needs of LGBTQ homeless youth are gravely lacking and/or inaccessible.

While there are between 5,000–10,000 homeless LGBTQ youth in New York City, there are only 60–70 beds available to serve youth in need of LGBTQ-specific housing and services.

To escape from cycles of violence, victimization and displacement, LGBTQ youth need to be assured of: safety from violence posed by peers and staff in group homes and the mainstream shelter system; access to healthcare specific to the needs of physically transitioning transgender youth; access to mental health care that is responsive to particular forms of trauma experienced by LGBTQ youth in their family and school lives; housing arrangements that recognize a full spectrum of gender identities and are responsive to the placement preferences of transgender individuals; a community of peers with which to safely and comfortably express their gender and/or sexual identity; and the support of openly LGBTQ adult role models living fully developed, healthy lives. But LGBTQ youth in towns and cities throughout the US are hard-pressed to find these services.

4 Homeless LGBTQ persons, particularly transgender youth and youth of color, are forced into sex work and other unsafe and illegal activities due to job and housing discrimination.

It is currently legal for employers to discriminate on the basis of gender identity in 37 states, outside of 93 cities and counties that have enacted legislation on the local level. Only 17 states and 180 cities and counties explicitly prohibit employment discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

Denied access to legitimate means of income, homeless LGBTQ persons are often left with no choice but to engage in an informal street economy defined by sex work and the drug trade. A 2004 survey of transgender youth in Philadelphia found that 46% said they had engaged in sex work.

5 LGBTQ persons, particularly if they are youth, homeless, transgender, and/or of color, are more vulnerable to profiling, selective enforcement and brutality at the hands of law enforcement authorities.

One attorney working with the Sylvia Rivera Law Project in New York reported that 80% of the transgender women of color he works
with have experienced police harassment or false arrest based on unfounded suspicions they are involved in sex work.

In New York’s West Village, LGBTQ youth of color have reported being targets of police brutality and selective enforcement of “quality of life” ordinances such as anti-loitering laws. According to Amnesty International, “Discriminatory policing of ‘quality of life’ regulations appears to be strong in gentrifying areas, which have traditionally provided safe space for LGBTQ individuals.”

6 LGBTQ youth are likely to receive harsher and longer sentences than their heterosexual peers for the same crimes.

Juvenile defendants have a greater chance of receiving lighter sentences and being considered eligible for less restrictive placements when they appear in court with parental support. Youth who have been rejected by their parents or guardians due to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity are less likely to have such support.

Homophobia and transphobia within the justice system also make LGBTQ youth and adults more likely to receive harsher sentences. In a study published in the National Law Journal, when jurors in the US were asked what factors would make them most biased against a defendant, perceived sexual orientation was the most likely personal characteristic to cause bias, three times greater than race.

7 In jails and prisons, transgender women are routinely placed in general male populations.

This widespread practice results in abuse of incarcerated transgender women at the hands of fellow inmates and guards. In perhaps the most well-known case, Dee Farmer, a pre-operative transgender woman serving 20 years for credit card fraud, was raped, beaten, and threatened at knife-point by a male inmate while housed in the general male population of a high-security federal penitentiary in Terre Haute, Indiana. After filing a complaint, prison officials ignored her claims and transferred her into administrative segregation.

Transgender men also face abusive conditions when jails and prisons have no consistent policies regarding their placement. An Amnesty International investigation reported that in November 2003, a transgender man in New York was handcuffed to a pole “because police officers did not know where to house him.”

8 Transgender prisoners are denied basic medical treatment as well as medical treatment specific to their needs as transgender people.

Prisoner and LGBTQ rights groups have widely documented the denial or delay of emergency medical attention following sexual or physical abuse of an inmate; denial of or lack of adequate mental health and counseling services; refusal to release prescription medications to inmates; denial or inadequacy of women’s reproductive health care; and the denial of hormone therapy and sex reassignment surgery to transgender prisoners.

The denial of healthcare to LGBTQ prisoners is so widespread that it is referenced three times in the UN Human Rights Network Prison Working Group’s 2008 report on violations of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination in US prisons.

9 LGBTQ prisoners report experiencing disciplinary action for involvement in same-sex relationships.

Prison officials routinely overlook and sometimes even encourage sexual abuse of prisoners by inmates of the same sex, particularly in male prisons. Yet when LGBTQ prisoners attempt to foster relationships based on intimacy and love, they are persecuted and subjected to abuse and disciplinary action, including solitary confinement. LGBTQ prisoners are also routinely denied contact with and visits from their partners on the outside.

10 In general, LGBTQ prisoners are at a greater risk of violence and discrimination while incarcerated due to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

While prisons and jails are sites of abuse for all incarcerated people, LGBTQ prisoners consistently experience more frequent and more severe acts of abuse than heterosexual prisoners. These include physical, sexual, and verbal abuse by guards; inaction of prison officials in the face of abuse at the hands of fellow inmates; random and unnecessary strip searches; and forced isolation.

For the experiences of LGBTQ prisoners to be severely and consistently worse than those of heterosexual prisoners is an affront to the rights of all LGBTQ persons everywhere.

Today, LGBTQ activists are increasingly focusing their organizing efforts on LGBTQ homelessness and incarceration. For instance, queer youth of color group FIERCE! has been organizing against police harassment and brutality in New York City’s West Village.

LGBTQ-specific shelters and transitional living programs like Sylvia’s Place and the Ali Forney Center in New York are gaining greater visibility and becoming more established in major cities across the US. And organizations like the Transgender, Gender Variant, and Intersex (TGI) Justice Project, based in California, are standing up for the rights of LGBTQ prisoners against abuse, discrimination and medical neglect. The work of these organizations is invaluable as the fight for LGBTQ rights moves forward.
Cara Page is a Black queer cultural worker, organizer, and healing arts practitioner running her own independent consulting and training company, Deeper Waters. She is also a founding member of Kindred, a southern healing justice collective based in Atlanta. She has organized in the queer, environmental and reproductive justice, anti-violence and youth movements, and collaborates both regionally and nationally to create spaces of reflection and transformation for political and energy-based healing work to build sustainability and well-being for organizers and our movements. Ms. Page is a published poet, playwright and documentarian featured in Telling Stories to Change the World. She has received a Rockefeller Foundation Next Generation Leadership Fellowship and the National Center for Human Rights Education’s Award for Leadership.

Tell us about your current work

I am working as an organizer in the South with several ongoing projects including the Southerners on New Ground Organizing School (www.southernersonnewground.org). My vision as an organizer is to help build strategies towards creating infrastructure for Southern-based movements in the US. Kindred, a new collective, is building a political framework and wider awareness of healing arts practices as a response to collective trauma and conditions in our movements and region.

At CLPP, I was involved in local and national organizing efforts as a student activist; I worked on the conference for four years. While there I was introduced to inspiring organizers nationally and internationally. Marlene sent me to several conferences around the country to speak on behalf of CLPP.

My work at that time focused on the colonization of female bodies – in particular, the control of Black queer bodies and women of color bodies and how we were subject to violence, from sterilization abuse to state persecution. But I was interested in particular with the stories of Black queer women who had survived systemic violence and transformed their experiences. I studied queer Black and women of color history and used the performance arts to tell their political stories of struggle, power and transformation.

How did you become involved with CWPE?

CWPE – the Committee on Women, Population and the Environment – is a multi-racial alliance of feminist community organizers, scholarly activists and health practitioners committed to promoting the social and economic empowerment of women in a context of global peace and justice, and eliminating poverty.

I was the national director of CWPE, which was originally conceived as a project of the Population and Development Program through Betsy Hartmann in the early 1980’s, as a response to the resurgence of population control at that time. At CWPE, my work came full circle. It brought my own political context up to speed on what was happening internationally in the 21st Century – how women of color, queer communities, working class communities, and people with disabilities were still being targeted and blamed for environmental degradation and our own oppression. Our work sought to debunk the myth that as women of color, queer folk, people with disabilities, and other disenfranchised communities, we are not the root cause of environmental and social injustices, and to shed light on the true causes of our conditions – war, profit-driven industry, and systemic violence, to name a few.

My work at CWPE, nationally and internationally, focused on the importance of unpacking the medical, military and prison industrial complex, looking particularly at the history of scientific technologies and biocolonialism that are still carrying out practices that render our bodies expendable.

Black bodies are still only viewed as labor – that our reproduction is only valuable for labor. This commodification has also been applied to other women of color bodies and queer bodies. Women, queer people, people with disabilities, people of color: we are still seen as genetically inferior. It is implicit in reproductive and environmental injustices because our communities are still viewed as vessels and inhuman.

CWPE challenged both population control ideologies and the use of science to perpetuate ideas of genetic inferiority to move a population control agenda. In deepening my analysis around this, I found that all the work I’ve done around violence – especially racial and sexual violence, and in particular with the experiences of women of color, people with disabilities and queer communities – witnessed the intersection of medical and scientific control through state violence.

Is this what led you to a radical redefinition of healing?

Yes. We were talking about our bodies as a place of wellness – but what do we mean by wellness that is still being defined by the medical industrial complex?

I began to cross paths with fierce disability justice, environmental justice and international human rights organizers, who were looking at the privatization of our bodies, genes, seeds, and natural resources. I wanted to push the boundaries even more in seeing more political links of how we are combating these larger systems that are defining and controlling our experiences of emotional, physical, spiritual and environmental well-being.

In the last three years, I had many more conversations with organizers who are trying to debunk a system of health and healthcare that has never been about sustaining our bodies and wellness – but always about controlling it, or perpetuating
pathologies of our bodies. Out of this, Kindred became a necessary and new project to mobilize our southern movements to define our own experience of wellness, and respond to the condemnation of our community healing practices that have been strategically taken, stolen and removed from us so that we had to rely on state medical systems.

There is a critical need between organizers and social justice healers to work together to respond to the medical industrial complex, to create new ideas and regenerate traditions of wellness that are about sustaining our bodies and our environments. When Katrina happened and there was no direct response by the federal or state government, we asked ourselves how can we in the South create sustainable networks that are available to respond to our own natural disasters, and to our own conditions of emotional, spiritual, physical, environmental and psychic unrest? We’ve got to do this differently!

With the particular history in the South, of slavery, sterilization abuse, and the high rate of long-term dangerous contraceptives disproportionately used on poor women and people with disabilities as a tool of population control – the South continues to be a testing ground for new scientific technologies, from the Tuskegee experiments to the use of Quinacrine on immigrant women at the borders to sterilize. This still stems from the historical notion of our bodies being seen as less than human. How do we create a holistic way to respond to these abominations – to these new eugenic practices? As an organizer and healer, I see a common disconnect between broad-based healing practices and social justice strategies that we cannot afford anymore.

The irony is that organizers on the front lines working for reproductive and environmental justice are dropping out of our movements to become healers instead of finding ways to create holistic practices of wellness, looking at our whole bodies and wellness in the context of our movements. Our need to be well and organize against the conditions and systemic oppressions are not separate, and the longer they stay compartmentalized we will be at emotional/spiritual/physical and environmental risk.

We must build relationships with each other, so we can think about how we are going to stay politically, spiritually, mentally, emotionally and physically well. We must build a political movement that responds to the medical-industrial complex through a holistic lens. Through Kindred, I am working with visionary organizers who can see how our systems of well-being have become embedded in systems of oppression and how this has caused a traumatic impact on our bodies, hearts, spirits and minds. We must respond as social justice healers and organizers to achieve political transformation, by envisioning wellness for our communities and our environments.

Visit our website at http://popdev.hampshire.edu to download a free copy or request a CD. 

SUPPORT OUR PROGRAMS

Your donation will help bring new activists and leaders into the movement for reproductive freedom and justice. Please use the enclosed envelope to send as generous a gift as you can, or visit our website at: http://clpp.hampshire.edu/ and click Donate.

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- Open mic, performances, exhibit tables, and networking

APRIL 3-5, 2009