

Astraea LESBIAN FOUNDATION FOR JUSTICE

threads

Meet the Activist Series: Voices on the Ground

Astraea's *Meet the Activist* series helps cultivate an informed base of supporters globally. Director of Programs, Mai Kiang, said, "The series provides a forum for our grantee partners to speak directly about their work and dialogue with supporters. These first-person accounts provide an in-depth look at the issues and bring together people who might otherwise never connect." One recent *Meet the Activist* event, held simultaneously in Astraea's office and via telecast, highlighted Colombia and another featured Uganda. The two events emphasized the truly global nature of the struggle for LGBTI human rights.

Colombia

Meet the Activist: Colombia featured Marcela Sánchez Buitrago, of grantee-partner Colombia Diversa. Marcela spoke of a contradictory climate. Colombia's constitution purports to provide equal rights for all, and there are legal footholds to make progress toward this goal. However, areas of the country are rife

with armed conflict, and LGBTI people face stereotyping in the media, hate violence and attacks from religious fundamentalists. Five years ago, when these fundamentalists first marched against homosexuality, Marcela said, "It was unbelievable that one group would march against another."

However, "As LGBT rights increase, the incidence of violence against us increases as well. Precisely for our work for visibility, we become visible targets," explained Marcela. Thus, cultural change is essential to maintaining legal progress and rolling back or preventing hateful legislation. To accomplish this, Colombia Diversa is



From left: Rev. Patricia Ackerman, of the Unitarian Universalist UN Office; Frank Mugisha, SMUG; and Rev. Dr. Kapyia Kaoma, of Political Research Associates. Photo by Raymond Hsia

Despite the challenges, in 2009, Colombia Diversa won a legal victory extending civil union benefits to same-sex couples for the first time. With Astraea's support over the last five years, the organization has developed a national reach, mobilizing large-scale policy change through human rights monitoring, advocacy, community organizing and litigation.

strengthening alliances with other social movements and combating stereotypes in the media and in schools, using its groundbreaking research and informational materials.

Uganda

Attendees of *Meet the Activist: Uganda* heard first-hand accounts of the intensified anti-gay rhetoric fueled

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Dorothy Sander Knows the Value of a Dollar

From her working-class roots to her successful business career, Dorothy Sander has built a reputation for being generous and smart with her resources.

“Money was tight when I was starting out, so I knew how to use every dollar I made and shared any extra with my family,” Dorothy said. “I worked during the day, went to school at night and, when I grew more successful, began giving to organizations. I am as strategic now as when I had less.”

As a successful woman and private investor, Dorothy knows the value of a dollar—or perhaps, more accurately, she knows how to get value out of her dollars. One strategy she uses is partnering with Astraea.



Dorothy Sander Photo by Angela Jimenez

“I started out as a small donor and have now become a significant donor because I want Astraea to continue its work well into the future,” she said. “I’m invested in

Astraea because ‘Justice’ is as much in its name as it is in its practice.”

Dorothy first became involved with Astraea because she was impressed to see a foundation being “led entirely by smart, powerful and socially conscious women,” and she appreciated the types of “investments made in our community and worldwide.”

As the current Board Chair for the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, Dorothy is acutely focused on advancing human rights. “I have been involved in the LGBTI movement for over three decades. In the early days I stuffed envelopes with the foot soldiers; now I contribute by sitting on boards and

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From left: Marcela Sánchez Buitrago, Colombia Diversa and Natalie J. Isaac, Trans NY Empowerment Photo by Raymond Hsia

by Western religious fundamentalists. Frank Mugisha, of grantee partner Sexual Minorities Uganda (SMUG); Rev. Dr. Kapyka Kaoma, of Political Research Associates; and Rev. Patricia Ackerman, of the Unitarian Universalist UN Office, provided context for the recent international uproar over the now-tabled Anti-Homosexuality Bill.

The speakers characterized the bill as a distraction from real issues affecting

Ugandans and spoke of the difficulties of securing human rights in a country with an equal rights bill that “grants minorities rights only if the majority accepts.” Rev. Ackerman explained, “Martin Ssempe [an infamous fundamentalist pastor in Uganda] is on the radio all the time whipping up hatred and scapegoating gay people for everything: lack of jobs, lack of money, problems with children, problems with marriages; every conceivable thing is the fault of the gay person. So you have grandmothers get up and vow that the first gay person they see, they will beat up.”

Frank Mugisha spoke of his visit to the parents of an imprisoned gay man, whose address was reported in the newspaper. Frank said, “They told me that they used to give homosexuals special names. They never used to beat them up or harass them, until the religious groups started their propaganda, saying, ‘homosexuals are recruiting,’ ‘homosexuals are molesting your children.’ Before, of course, homosexuals were different, but throughout the African culture, they would have

their special places in society. But now, it is very harsh for everyone who is a sexual minority.”

Rev. Kaoma spoke about his groundbreaking undercover report, published by Public Research Associates, that blew the cover off of the Western religious fundamentalist infiltration into Ugandan culture and politics. “I discovered that Western evangelicals have enormous power and access in Africa. They can just walk into the office of the president in the name of Jesus,” said Rev. Kaoma. “One thing people don’t understand about African politics is that Africa was once a colonized continent. In the U.S., Scott Lively [a holocaust-denier and U.S. mega-church crusader] said, ‘What influence could I, a little person, have had over the entire Parliament of Uganda?’ And I said, ‘What were you doing with them for all those hours?’ It’s because of the colonial aspect that he is able to access this.”

To fight back, LGBTI Ugandans formed a coalition with other civil society



directing financial investments.” Through annual contributions, a donor-advised fund and a lifetime pledge of \$1 million to Astraea, Dorothy invests to advance her values.

“It’s important to me that Astraea resources organizations both in the U.S. and around the world simultaneously—both for the sake of supporting the rights of people outside the U.S. and as a strategy for putting on outside pressure to improve things here in the U.S.”

Dorothy cites the donor-advised fund program as one of the greatest benefits of partnering with Astraea. The program allows her to maximize the power of her investments by designating funds to support a specific interest area within Astraea’s mission, such as filmmaking, while benefiting from the expertise of

Astraea’s grantmaking panel to select recipients and perform all necessary due diligence. By endowing an annual \$10,000 grant to a filmmaker whose

“We need to keep growing our cadre of like-minded people and fund the full expression of our rights—all of our rights.”

—Dorothy Sander, Astraea donor partner

work focuses on the lives of lesbians, Dorothy is able to advance the work of her late partner, Joyce Warshow.

“My late partner was a filmmaker dedicated to documenting the lives of lesbians who contributed to social justice movements around the world. We both believed in the importance of making these women visible, and Astraea helped us do that by funding three of Joyce’s early film projects. Now I’m able to support an annual grant to ensure that this work carries forward.”

Dorothy is enthusiastic about being part of an engaged donor community: “Astraea puts like-minded donors together. We need to keep growing our cadre of like-minded people and fund the full expression of our rights—all of our rights.”



groups to expose the human rights and health consequences of the bill.

Rev. Kaoma calls on Westerners to expose the hypocrisy of Western fundamentalist leaders who propagate hate in Uganda and then deny their statements in the U.S. He explained, “The very same arguments that were once used in America are the same arguments now being used by African pastors against LGBT persons.”

Despite the false claims that LGBTI people are somehow new to Africa, the story of the rural parents who remember a time when LGBTI people had a respected place in society confirms that what has actually been imported into Africa is hate, not homosexuality. 

To listen to either presentation in its entirety, visit eThreads.org

A “Little Beacon of Light” in Arkansas

Amanda Harris was born and raised in a small town near Little Rock, Arkansas, that now boasts its second stoplight due to the recent arrival of a Walmart. In her rural farming community, Amanda said, “There were no out people, but there were always rumors. My family used to say ‘He has a little sugar in his tank,’ these great Southern colloquialisms, and there was talk. But nobody was out. Being out in my high school would have been an absolute nightmare.” Fortunately, in college Amanda found Astraea grantee partner Center for Artistic Revolution (CAR), a queer organization based in Little Rock that combines arts-based activism with policy work. When she came across the group’s booth at an event, she was drawn in by “the way CAR was utilizing art to tell a story.” She became a member immediately. Now she has been on the board for five years. “It just breaks my heart for rural queer people who have



CAR’s Banner. Courtesy of Center for Artistic Revolution

nowhere to go. That’s why little beacons of light like CAR are so crucial.”

“Young people are in these tiny schools with no outlets,” Amanda explained. School prayer is prevalent, and there is a strict prohibition on any mention of sex. Queer and gender-nonconforming youth are harassed constantly, slurs are

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Amanda Harris *Photo by Melissa Hoskins*

hurlled and queer couples are barred from prom. To combat this, CAR does much of its organizing with youth, who make up a third of the board. "I had never been part of a multigenerational organization where everyone's input mattered," Amanda said. "That left a profound feeling with me that young people have to be the driving force behind organizing that affects them."

Funded by Astraea's Multi-Year Movement-Building Initiative, CAR is making an impact in Arkansas. The arts-based activism that attracted Amanda is used to move hearts, open minds and influence policy change. Because of CAR's involvement, the

Citizen's First Congress, a statewide group of progressive organizations, agreed to incorporate queer issues into its policy goals. At the annual meeting, "CAR showed a film about the Bible and queer folks, which is the primary obstacle with many of the groups," Amanda said. After the film, one elderly woman was so moved that she told CAR she was going to call her lesbian daughter, whom she had not spoken to in years.

With a successful campaign to retire an American Indian mascot, the fighting of the 2008 gay-adoption ban in Arkansas and the collaborative work with people of color groups on immigration, CAR's "Nobody gets left behind" model has forever affected Amanda. "It's amazing that this little organization in this very conservative state is doing really radical work through an arts-based intersectional model. Our executive director, Randy, always says 'race, class, gender, sexual orientation—all these things are connected, and we have to see that.' Utilizing arts to do intersectional work is really powerful. I'd hope that people could use art in their own work, because it resonates with people. It is a really good stepping stone to getting folks to see that the issues are not siloed and identity isn't siloed." 

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OUR MISSION

The Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice works for social, racial, economic and gender justice in the U.S. and internationally. Our grantmaking and philanthropic advocacy programs help lesbians and allied communities challenge oppression and claim their human rights.

Astraea threads Summer 2010

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