

CUAV Celebrates 30th Years And Talks About Violence

By Dennis McMillan

Published: March 26, 2009

Community United Against Violence (CUAV) celebrated three decades of healing and transformation on March 20 at 111 Minna Gallery. CUAV announced a bold new vision: to build LGBTQ power to transform violence and oppression. As part of the larger social justice movement, they said they are working to create thriving communities organized around collective liberation, not abuse or exploitation. They said they see violence as a key opportunity to transform queer relationships, communities, and movements. CUAV has worked to build safe, healing LGBTQ communities free from violence. As part of the larger social justice movement, they support those impacted by abuse and mobilize their broader communities to effectively transform all forms of violence.



Honoree Sean Dorsey of Fresh Meat with presenters Tina D'Elia and Carolina Morales. Photo by Rink.

"We were founded in 1979 in a climate of escalating violence and growing struggle for social justice," said CUAV Executive Director Jovida Ross.

"Tonight, 30 years later, we proudly launch into the next era of our efforts."

"Looking back at our history, the courageousness of our communities is evident," said Ross. "Tonight we honor those groundbreaking activists who first took a stand for LGBTQ safety, and all those who followed in their footsteps, deepening our path." She said, "We also honor the thousands of brave survivors and dedicated volunteers that CUAV has worked with during the past three decades, and recognize their investment in building a loving community free from violence."

Both longtime SF LGBT rights activists Tom Ammiano and Hank Wilson co-founded the Gay Speakers Bureau in 1978 to combat anti-queer bias in schools in the context of rampant homophobia catalyzed by the Briggs Initiative 6 – a witch hunt against lesbian/gay schoolteachers. Ammiano – now an Assemblyman but then a dedicated teacher and activist – served on the SF Board of Education where he won the inclusion of LGBT sensitivity into the SF Unified School District curriculum, and collaborated with Wilson in the No on 6 Campaign. Wilson co-founded a number of social justice organizations including the Gay Teachers Coalition, the Butterfly Brigade, LYRIC, Tenderloin AIDS Resource Center, and SF Gay Democratic Club (later becoming the Harvey Milk LGBT Democratic Club). Wilson died in November 2008 of lung cancer at the age of 61. Both fierce, dedicated community activists were honored that night. "Every time we fought for gay rights, Hank and I were always scared shitless, but we always had fun," said Ammiano. "Fear always made us take that one step further." He told his amusing story of 16 years of Catholic school and the nuns trying to beat the gay out of him – happily an unsuccessful attempt.

Also awarded was the organization, INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, founded in 2000 following a groundbreaking conference organized at UC Santa Cruz. Over the past nine years, INCITE! has grown into a powerful national activist organization of radical feminists of color advancing a movement to end violence against women of color and their communities through direct action, critical dialogue, and grassroots organizing. INCITE! has organized three subsequent conferences in Chicago, Santa Barbara, and New Orleans; has produced two widely-read anthologies; and has developed innovative strategies to end intimate, community, and state violence.

The third organization to be honored was GroundSpark for producing and distributing groundbreaking films, educational resources, and campaigns on issues ranging from environmental concerns to affordable housing to preventing prejudice. They have been a leader in sparking compassionate conversation within schools about LGBT issues and lives through their Respect for All Project, with widely-acclaimed documentary films including "It's Elementary: Talking About Gay Issues in Schools," "That's a Family," "Let's Get Real," and most recently, "Straightlaced: How Gender's Got Us All Tied Up." "It's Elementary" features a presentation from CUAV's LGBT Speakers Bureau, and was recently re-released as "It's STILL Elementary."

They showed an impressive clip from the latter docu-film.

The fourth group to be honored was Fresh Meat Productions – founded in 2001 by Sean Dorsey, artistic director and award-winning dancer/ choreographer – for providing a professional venue for transgender artists to promote community, visibility, and dialogue. In the face of the multiple barriers facing transgender artists – limited infrastructure and performing opportunities and censorship from funding agencies – Fresh Meat has gone on to produce widely-acclaimed annual performance festivals playing to full capacity houses and receiving substantial media coverage, as well as a range of successful gallery exhibitions and community events. Dorsey thanked CUAV for 30 successful years and led the crowd in a spirit clap – starting with slow, light clapping and gradually building into thundering applause. "We believe that self expression and artistic expression are powerful forces for authentic community building, justice seeking, and personal and cultural transformation," he said. "We share CUAV's goals in radical cultural transformation by opening our communities to deep healing and joy."

CUAV announced a three-year plan consisting of centering communities impacted by multiple forms of violence and oppression in all areas of their work – particularly LGBTQ people who are low-income, young, immigrant, and/or people of color; developing viable models of community accountability that can build the power of relationships, neighborhoods, and movements as they respond to violence; building the leadership of survivors, their families and intimate networks, organizations, and neighborhoods to transform violence in everyone's lives, communities, and movements; shifting their organizational structure towards a community-driven shared leadership model that promotes true collaboration and sustainability; and continuing to provide vital emergency support and healing opportunities to LGBTQ survivors of violence and abuse through their 24-hour crisis line and peer counselors.

The evening was completed with dancing and intermittent performances by Taiko Ren Japanese style drumming; Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, a queer Sri Lankan writer and performer; and Lex Beatty, a transgender activist, dynamic speaker, and spoken word artist from Santa Cruz.