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MONICA ROBERTS: IN HER OWN WORDS



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Monica Roberts passed away on October 6th, 2020. We honor her memory by sharing her acceptance speech given on January 16, 2020, after she was honored with the Sue Hyde Award for Longevity in the Movement during the Creating Change Conference in Dallas, Texas.

Monica Roberts | January 16, 2020

Wow. Rea Carey, the Creating Change leadership team, the Dallas CC20 Organizing Committee, Barbara Satin, Creating Change 2020 attendees, my Houston activist family, and my trans siblings.

I am beyond thrilled and excited to be honored with this award, the Susan J Hyde Award for Longevity in the Movement. Even better is the knowledge that I'm receiving it in my home state. The only thing that would have made it more amazing would have been to be receiving it on my end of Interstate 45.

I humbly accept it not only for myself but for every Black trans person who will never have the opportunity to contribute their talents to our community because they were taken from us far too soon.

Can we please have a moment of silence for all the trans people we've lost to anti-trans violence in 2019?

[Silence]

Thank you.

I'm not the first Black trans person to receive this award, and you can trust and believe I won't be the last Black trans person standing up on a future Creating Change stage to pick up one of their own.

Kylar Broadus received the Hyde award during Creating Change 2011 held in Minneapolis. He's a trailblazer, community leader, and a man I have the utmost respect for. I'm proud to be on this stage, following in his footsteps and receiving this prestigious award.

As much as native Houstonians like myself revel in poking fun at the third largest city in the state because it is ingrained in people growing up either here or in Dallas to throw shade at each other and their respective NFL franchises, there is no denying the fact that Dallas has been a major part of my life. My mom grew up here until her junior year of high school and my grandfather was transferred by his Continental Airlines job to Houston.

Every summer, my family and I made the four-hour trip up I-45 to Dallas to visit many of my relatives that still live here to this day. They span the Metroplex from Garland to DeSoto, and South Dallas to Oak Cliff. I've been coming here since 2013 for the Black Trans Advocacy Conference. I proudly sit on the Black Trans Advocacy Coalition board as a member of Black transwomen Inc. I'll be back here to spend my birthday week at BTAC's 9th annual conference also being held here in Dallas May 5-10—and I hope many of you here will join us!

[Applause]

And I can't forget last year when I made multiple trips to Dallas for everything from a BTAC leadership institute to Muhlaysia Booker's wake and funeral.

I've been a trans activist for over two decades, and 2019 was a milestone year on two levels. It marked 25 years since that April 4th, 1994, day I walked into Houston's Intercontinental Airport to begin the work shift at my airline job that would change the course of my life for the better.

2019 also was the year that I passed the 20th anniversary of my first Texas trans lobby day organized by my late mentor Sarah DePalma, the ED of the Texas Gender Advocacy Information Network or TGAİN. TGAİN is still around but is now called the Transgender Education Network of Texas and is run by Emmett Schelling.

It also marked the 20th anniversary of me attending my first Creating Change conference in Oakland.

But to be honest, when I started the transition in '94, being an activist was the furthest thing from my mind. My goals then were a little more modest. I wanted to do my 35 years at the airline job I absolutely loved and retire. I wanted to just get comfortable being me and enjoy my life evolving into the fabulous Black trans woman you see on this stage today.

[Applause]

There's an old saying that if you want to make God laugh, try to plan out your life.

There used to be an organization back in the day called the International Foundation for Gender Education (IFGE) that was around until 2015. Back in the 90's they published a quarterly magazine called *Transgender Tapestry* that I started a subscription to in 1995.

In 1997 they decided to publish a series of articles highlighting 100 out and proud trans leaders. The first magazine I received highlighted 25 people, many of them iconic elders in our community like Jamison Green and Phyllis Frye just to name a few.

But as I read that article, I was left looking at all 25 of the folks and wondering, "Where are the trans leaders who look like me?" I know we exist.

I get my next quarterly *Tapestry* issue, and the next issue finally two Black people in it. RuPaul and Dennis Rodman.

Needless to say, I was not pleased. RuPaul and Dennis Rodman had made it quite clear at the time that they weren't trans, and worst of all, their inclusion was perpetuating a racist stereotype that the only thing Black folks could do was be an entertainer or an athlete.

Never mind the fact that Marisa Richmond in Nashville and Dawn Wilson in Louisville were at that time running trans support groups called the Tennessee Vols and the Bluegrass Belles on opposite ends of I-65. Marisa and Dawn were also emerging Black trans community leaders that I would later meet at the '99 Southern Comfort in Marisa's case and Dawn at the 2000 IFGE Convention in Washington, DC. I'm also proud to call both of them my friends.

So after seeing that and being totally pissed off about it, I resolved to not only be at the 1998 GenderPac Lobby Days in Washington DC, I made it my mission to start getting involved in local and national trans activism.

So yeah, a jacked-up article in a trans magazine, of all things, was the impetus for me getting into trans activism, and I never looked back.

When I came into trans activism in 1998, there was unfortunately a prevailing attitude that adding trans folks to pending legislation for the TBLGQ community would kill it for everybody, so all TBLGQ activism at the local, state and federal level operated on the euphemistically named "incremental progress" model.

Translation: We trans folks were told by some Big Gay Org this bill won't pass with you trans folks in it. Or we were told that trans rights was too new, so let's just take what we can get for the rest of the community, and we'll come back for you trans folks later.

A later that never came. Ask the trans folks in Wisconsin, who have been waiting since 1982 for people to come back for them and add them to their state's nondiscrimination law.

Sometimes the anti-trans legislative hostility came from our own community. The anti-trans bathroom argument was created not by Republican politicians, but by one of our own in former U.S. Rep. Barney Frank in 1999 because he didn't want trans folks included in the Employment Non-discrimination Act.

The 1998 landscape I joined also included the trans community being relentlessly attacked by TERFs, evangelicals, and laughed at and considered a joke by politicians on both sides of the political aisle. We're not a joke anymore.

But still, we rose. During my 22 years in this movement, I have been blessed to see changes in how the trans community was perceived, and happy to say that the Task Force played a major role in making that happen. As the Political Director of the National Transgender Advocacy Coalition (NTAC) from 1999-2002, one of the first events I attended in that role was a National Transgender Policy meeting facilitated by the Task Force in 2000.

I got to witness the rise of our trans kids like Jazz Jennings and the Mama and Papa Bears as a political and cultural force for our community.

I got to witness politicians stop laughing at the trans community and take our demands for human rights equity seriously.

I started a blog in 2006 “nobody reads” called TransGriot—yeah, that’s what one of my critics said about me once and I’m still laughing at him for saying it—that not only just celebrated its 14th anniversary on New Year’s Day, but was just honored with its fifth GLAAD Media Award nomination.

I get to watch an amazing TV show called *POSE* in which the issues that affect the trans community get told as you watch it from coast to coast. The trans characters are also played by trans women, with trans women being writers and producers of the show, like Our Lady J and Janet Mock. Keep the storylines flowing!

[Applause]

I’m also happy to witness trans men not only become better known in Hollywood but stepping up across the country and the world to take on their leadership roles in the movement. I’m also proud to see my Dallas based sibs in BTMI under Carter Brown’s leadership role model not only what that leadership looks like from a Black trans masculine perspective, but also be sterling examples of Black men while doing so.

I have gotten to witness people like Virginia Delegate Danica Roem get elected and re-elected to their state legislature. I got to see Black trans people like me in Councilmembers Andrea Jenkins and Phillipe Cunningham be elected to the Minneapolis city council and serve together on that body.

And naw siblings, I didn’t forget about the work that nonbinary and gender non-conforming people are doing to drive home the point that gender is on a spectrum, not a rigid binary.

I have also been blessed to witness the beautiful sight of our Texas trans kids living up to our history of tenacious fighters for trans rights in the Lone Star State and helping lead the charge in 2017 to kill twice the odious S.B. 6 “Bathroom Bill” in a regular and a special oppression session.

It’s interesting and serendipitous that Creating Change is back here in Texas at a potential tipping point moment in our politics. We are now only nine seats away from taking the Texas House back under Democratic control for the first time since 2002. There’s the possibility that we may flip this state blue on November 3rd and flush John Cornyn out of his Senate seat he has occupied for way too long at the same time.

We have lesbian and gay officeholders across the Lone Star State from judges to City Council members to state legislators—including two of our City Council members that sit on the Dallas City Council, Omar Narvaez and Adam Medrano. I hope to see in my lifetime a Texas trans person get elected to public office before the decade of the 2020s has passed into the history books. That might be me, we’ll see.

[Applause]

But much needs to be done here in Texas before we can see that glorious day. We must flip our legislature and ensure that fair maps instead of gerrymandered ones are drawn. We must make sure that every TBLGQ person is counted in the upcoming 2020 Census and registered to vote and not just register to vote take your butt's to the poll and do so.

On November 3rd, we must do everything within our power to ensure that every person who is registered to vote has the opportunity to cast a ballot in a critical to our democracy election.

We must push to ensure that trans Texans are covered not only in our state's James Byrd Hate Crimes Act but a statewide nondiscrimination law.

In my Houston hometown, we must convince our female majority city council to pass HERO 2.0 and defend it from attack from the evangelicals and the Republican Party.

We must kill any proposed bills in Texas and anywhere else in the U.S. that seek to ban the ability of trans kids to get trans medical care before their 18th birthday or criminalize doctors for providing that treatment.

And I have a message for Gov. Greg Abbott, Lt. Governor Dan Patrick, and the Texas Republican Party: Don't mess with Texas trans kids.

Don't mess with our trans kids in the other 49 states either.

So, how do we accomplish all that? That's why you're here in the 214 area code for the next few days at Creating Change 2020. You are here to not only network with the people that can help you accomplish those goals, but learn new skills and brush up on ones you learned decades ago like I did at the previous Creating Change events that I've attended.

You are also here to hopefully make lifelong friends during the time you're here in Dallas for CC20.

In conclusion, when I transitioned a quarter-century ago, I never imagined standing up on stages as my fab self getting honored for the work I do to make my community, the city of Houston, the Lone Star State, and our nation better. I never imagined back in 1994 that I would be appearing on *Nightline* or MSNBC, or doing radio and print media interviews to talk about trans issues.

I didn't consider the possibility that people would be asking my unapologetically Black trans self to run for public office. I never thought about the fact that while I don't have children of my own, I would gain a whole lot of nieces and nephews who chose me to be their Aunt Monica.

But it's happening. I'm seen as a possibility model and an icon to a community that I'm unabashedly proud of. I'm proud of the next generation Black trans women I see who will make me look like a slacker

by the time that I'm done in terms of what they collectively accomplish for our movement.

And to quote our trans elder Miss Major, "I'm still fucking here."

Speaking of work, we've got work to do Creating Change 2020. Time to go handle our movement business, get our learn on, and get it done for the TBLGQ+ kids who look up to all of us.

And I'm not going to disappoint them.

[Applause]

Photos



Photos taken at 2020 Creating Change Conference. Photo credit: Devon Rowland

Video



Monica Roberts accepting the Sue Hyde Award for Longevity in the Movement on January 16, 2020, during the 2020 Creating Change Conference in Dallas, Texas.

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