

Sylvia Rivera Law Project

NEWSLETTER

Vol. 4 / No. 1 ... March 2006

SRLP Opposes the Closing of Gay and Trans Housing at Rikers!

Working in collaboration and coalition with other advocacy organizations, community groups, and community members, SRLP is opposing the DOC's unilateral closing of the gay and trans housing unit at Riker's Island, a New York City jail. The NYC Department of Correction's recent decision to eliminate the separate housing unit, commonly known as "gay and trans housing," will place innumerable gender non-conforming detainees at risk of rape and assault. It is well documented that general population is particularly unsafe for gender non-conforming detainees, who are frequent targets of violence.

SRLP was contacted to respond to the DOC's closing of the gay housing unit in late November 2005. This unit had been opened as part of a settlement which arose out of litigation prompted by the dangerous conditions in NYC jails during the 1970s. However, due to recent federal legislation, the Prison Litigation Reform Act, this settlement is no longer effective.

Lambda Legal and the National Gay and Lesbian TaskForce were contacted, along with SRLP to respond to the DOC's action. We are also working with a myriad of community groups on this issue including the Gender Identity Project at the LGBT Center, FIERCE, Gay Men's Health Crisis, the NYC Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project, People of Color in Crisis!, The Bronx Defenders, and the Legal Aid Society.

Initially, our response focused on working with DOC Commissioner Horn, concerning ways we can ensure that transgender, gender non-conforming, and queer people are protected from rape, sexual and physical assault, and harassment while in the care and custody of the DOC. Starting with a letter of concern, we met with Commissioner Horn



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Sylvia Rivera Law Project
322 8th Avenue, 3rd Floor
New York, NY 10001
t. 212.337.8550
f. 212.337.1972
info@srlp.org
www.srlp.org

Sylvia Rivera Law Project
322 8th Avenue, 3rd Floor
New York, NY 10001

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mission

The Sylvia Rivera Law Project (SRLP) works to guarantee that all people are free to self-determine gender identity and expression, regardless of income or race, and without facing harassment, discrimination or violence.



from the dst



SRLP Collective Retreat: Winter 2005

Hello from SRLP's Direct Services Team (Pooja, D., Gael, Diana, Z and Dean)! So much has happened since the last newsletter, and we're excited to share it with you. In September, D. Horowitz joined our team as an OSI Fellow, focusing his work on our incarcerated clients. In November, Pooja Gehi joined our team as a staff attorney, working on many types of cases, including immigration, foster youth, and domestic violence. Just recently, Diana, who works at Hispanic AIDS Forum, joined our team as a new member.

In terms of our policy work, there are four major updates to report. Most recently, in January, after a three-year campaign led by SRLP, Queers for Economic Justice and the Center, the NYC Department of Homeless Services finally issued a written policy stating that transgender people will be placed in shelters according to gender identity and safety concerns rather than birth gender. For decades trans people have faced rape, violence, and exclusion at City shelters, and this new policy is one of the best-written ones in the country, covering an enormous shelter system that hopefully will serve as an example to other cities still discriminating against trans homeless people. This is an enormous victory for SRLP!

In August, SRLP's drafting process with the Human Resources Administration and other community advocates came to a close with the completion of a

draft of a Best Practices Guide for HRA addressing how discrimination against trans employees of HRA and trans clients seeking welfare and shelter services should be avoided. The detailed Guide is now being reviewed by the Law Department, and we hope that it will eventually be City policy.

In February, SRLP found out that the recommendations we completed in July 2005 with the New York City Department of Health regarding sex designation change on birth certificates, which recommend eliminating the surgery requirement for changing sex, were approved by the DOH and are now on their way to the Board of Health where we hope for their approval. There will likely be a hearing or comment period before that approval, and we will be reaching out to the community, especially people born in New York City, to attest to the need for a policy change at that time. Please keep your eye out!

Finally, SRLP began similar negotiations with the New York State DOH, and we are hopeful that within the next year NYC and NYS will both have sex designation change policies that do not require surgery.

In terms of our lawsuits, many new developments have emerged in the last six months. With SRLP, our pro bono partner has filed a lawsuit on behalf of a young transgender woman who faced terrible sexual assault and retaliation at Attica Correctional Facility. We also filed suit in the case we've been developing with Lambda Legal and Debevoise & Plimpton on behalf of a transgender girl who faced discrimination in the juvenile justice system. We have appealed a preliminary ruling in our adoption discrimination case, where our client was denied the ability to adopt because he is transgender.

Things are going well overall. We're ironing out the kinks in our translation services, and always on the lookout for Spanish/English bilingual volunteers who are willing to assist us in providing services in Spanish. Please contact us if you'd be willing to be a part of our translation team!

Thanks,
Direct Services Team

Fighting Racism From Within and Without

Racial justice, specifically for trans and gender non-conforming people of color, is a central part of SRLP's mission and work. As such, we believe that SRLP should not only strive for racial justice through its programming, but also within our organizational structure and throughout all of our political analysis. It is not enough that our outwardly-focused work address racist oppression and discrimination; we must also acknowledge and actively address the racism and white privilege that exists within the collective itself.

To that end, the Collective has undertaken an intensive anti-racist organizational development process, having identified this work as a crucial priority. We have been guided in this work by Bree Carlson and SRLP board member M.E. Dueker, both trainers with Dismantling Racism Works, an organization dedicated to guiding community organizations through anti-racist processes. Beginning at our summer retreat in May 2005, we have worked together to form shared language around race and racist oppression and to address how racism functions within SRLP.

As part of our anti-racist organizational development process, we have established bodies within SRLP specifically dedicated to this work. Two caucuses, the people of color caucus and the white caucus, convene monthly as a space for us to discuss the way racial privilege and discrimination work within SRLP and to begin to address these issues on both individual and organizational levels. The Change Team, made up of two Collective members from each caucus, works to synthesize the identified needs and ideas of the Collective and come up with steps and practices we can take as an organization to dismantle racism. We also come together as an entire Collective at our retreats to work on these issues. Through this ongoing process, we hope to form a cohesive and consistent approach to racial justice, both in our inner and outer workings.

Closing Gay and Trans Housing at Rikers

Continued from page 1...

in January of 2006. We conveyed our concerns and heard Commissioner Horn's reasons for closing the unit.

Among his reasons were 1) his concern that people were dictating their security classification and housing unit, 2) his understanding that there were greater incidents of violence in the gay unit (including "uses of force" by DOC personnel), and 3) operational security concerns due to the voluntary nature of the unit. During our meeting, Commissioner Horn invited our input and recommendations on how to best ensure the safety of our community from rape and assault while in DOC custody and control.

Since the meeting, a working group of our coalition has been drafting recommendations to send to Commissioner Horn. Working within the existing structures, we hope to propose measures to ensure the safety of transgender and gender non-conforming people while under DOC custody. Additionally, we are considering all available strategies to ensure the safety of our communities.

DOC's action is particularly dangerous given the widespread discrimination against transgender, transsexual, intersex, and gender non-conforming people – particularly poor people and people of color in our communities. Given the reality that many trans people face discrimination forcing us out of jobs, homes, shelters, and schools, coupled with the profiling and policing of trans people as criminal, makes it more likely that members of our community, along with other oppressed and criminalized communities, will be arrested and may be held in Rikers. Without detracting from the importance of larger, community initiated, conversations around the policing and profiling of transgender people as well as the social and economic discrimination against trans people, it is crucial for us to engage the DOC and the city on how trans people held in city custody are treated.

The SRLP Collective: Building and Growing

SRLP Collective retreats are a time when the entire Collective comes together. All members of SRLP's six teams spend a weekend away from New York City together, planning, building, and reflecting. At these retreats we not only review past work, approve team work plans for the year and orient new members to the Collective, but we also develop togetherness as a Collective and work to build shared skills and analysis.

To that end, we engage in conversations about how the Collective functions internally as well as



externally. At our most recent winter retreat we spent a segment discussing the way in which SRLP deals with conflict as an organization. We discussed the importance of conflict, in that it pushes our thinking and our work as well as reveals important issues and dynamics for us to focus on as a group. This conversation has led to a commitment to deal with conflict as an organization, in a way that focuses on resolution and growth.



We also spent time at the retreat focusing on



our vision for the organization, our work, and community. Collective members each wrote their individual visions for the organization and then broke up into groups to draw collective visions for SRLP for the next 5 years. There were many similarities among each of the groups' visions. The most noticeable similarity was the desire for SRLP to continue taking a role in building the leadership and skills of our



communities so that our entire communities can engage in creating change.

In addition to all of the hard work and difficult conversations we have at retreats, we also spend time getting to know each other better, celebrating birthdays, playing games, and celebrating our accomplishments.

SRLP and Allies Win Victory for Trans Homeless People

Since 2003, representatives from the Sylvia Rivera Law Project (SRLP), Queens for Economic Justice, and the Gender Identity Project have been meeting with the New York City Department of Homeless Services to push them to comply with the changes passed to the New York City Human Rights Law in 2002 prohibiting discrimination on the basis of gender identity and expression. DHS has continued a policy of placing trans homeless people in shelters based on birth gender, resulting in brutal violence and discrimination that makes many people leave the shelter system or avoid it altogether, despite their need for housing. Horrible stories of violence faced by trans homeless people in DHS facilities come in to SRLP regularly. Most recently, a trans woman was hospitalized in January after being raped in a men's shelter.

The rigorous, three-year course of meetings and process we engaged in with DHS was often challenging. There were moments when we truly wondered if we would ever reach a solution without resorting to litigation (a costly, risky and time-consuming option). Despite this demanding process, on Tuesday, January 31, 2006 we arrived at an agreement with DHS on a formal policy that will place trans-people in shelters based on their self-identified gender. A few highlights of the policy include:

- * Trans-people will be placed in shelters according to gender identity and will be able to use appropriate sleeping, restroom and bathing facilities
- * Trans-people will be able to wear clothes that comply with their gender identities
- * DHS will be providing full training for all shelters, beginning with 6 specifically targeted shelters (to get things moving as quickly as possible)

This is a huge moment for the trans communities, representing a wave of change that is playing out in the work we have been engaged with in other city agencies. New York City now has one of the best shelter policies in the country and we are very excited and proud to share this information with as many people as possible. To read the

policy, please visit our website, www.srlp.org.

We want to thank and credit the other people and organizations who have helped make this new policy a reality including the New York City Department of Homeless Services (DHS), Franklin Romeo from the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, Ivan Dominguez from the Committee on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Issues at the New York County Lawyers' Association, Diana Olaizola and Patrick Markee from the Coalition for the Homeless (CFTH), and Joann Prinzivalli from the New York Transgender Rights Organization (NYTRO), as well as the many members of a larger working group hosted by QEJ who helped bring this issue to the Mayor's office and/or have participated for brief and particularly demanding periods.

We hope that activists and organizations will continue to work with SRLP to ensure that DHS complies with this new policy, and that proper training is implemented to make the promise of this policy a reality in the lives of homeless New Yorkers.

Community Action Alert!

New York's DMV, have started comparing records with the Social Security Administration (SSA), and sending letters threatening license suspension to anyone who has mismatching information between the two sets of records. As a result, thousands of New Yorkers are no longer able to get legal identification. Immigrants, transgender people, youth and homeless folks have all been seriously harmed by the new drivers' license laws.

Town Hall meeting on
THE IMPACT OF NEW DRIVER'S LICENSE LAWS
on New York State, and Organized Resistance to it

Thursday April 20th 6:00-8:30pm
LGBT Community Center
208 W.13th St.

WHAT KEEPS US AFLOAT?

...YOUR SUPPORT!

The Sylvia Rivera Law Project continues to grow in response to the great need facing our community. To finance our efforts, we rely on grassroots support from our community. While much of our funding comes from foundations, a large percentage comes from individual donors and is an essential component of our existence. Our successful fundraising events and activities are made possible by volunteer energy and community support.

Small Works for Big Change!

“Small Works for Big Change”, our first art auction to



benefit the work of the Sylvia Rivera Law Project was a tremendous success. Orchard, a gallery in the Lower East Side hosted this fundraising event on December 3 and 4, 2005. More than 45 pieces of art were up for auction from artists such as Amy Sillman, Glenn Ligon, Mo Casanova,

and more. It was a bustling two-day event with DJ Inge spinning opening night and crafts and limited edition silk-screened t-shirts for sale. The event raised



approximately \$9,500 to ensure that our doors stay open and that our important work continues. Thank you to all of the artists who donated their phenomenal work and Orchard who so graciously donated their space.

Creative Contributions - Fundraising Auctions!

SRLP regularly holds fundraising auctions with exciting entertainment, gifts and skills at our renowned house parties! If you have a connection with a restaurant, travel agent, are a particularly exciting cook, or can help prep someone for a test, you could auction it off. Contact Ryder Diaz at ryder@srlp.org if you have an auction item to donate.

SRLP T-Shirts!



SRLP T-shirts are now available! Designed by Jamie Stafford-Hill of our very own Public Education Team. T-shirts were made by Harlem Underground, a black owned printing shop in Harlem. You can get your t-shirts at SRLP events and they will soon be available on our website. For more information on how to get your SRLP threads, contact Ryder at ryder@srlp.org.

Variety Show and Valentine's Dance

Evening of Performances Benefitting SRLP

This January, SRLP hosted an evening of rock, glamour, and comedy at Rothko in the Lower East Side. Performers included hilarious comedian Katie Halper, quirky gay/Japanese/Jewish folk-singer Danny Katz, the glamorous diva Eonta Lace, the talented and beautiful band the Ballet, and the dynamic and enlivened Rude Mechanical Orchestra, all hosted by the illustrious Regie Cabico. Performers played to a large enthusiastic audience of SRLP supporters and we raised \$1,600 to support our work! Thanks to all of the performers and the staff at Rothko!

Valentine's Dance at the Big Apple Ranch

Thank you to all of the SRLP supporters who braved the blizzard of 2006 to two-step and slap leather to benefit our work. A huge thank you to the Big Apple Ranch for donating the proceeds from the evening to SRLP. A total of \$1,300!

A huge thank you to all who have sent in financial support since September:

Anonymous, Jen Abrams, Michael Adams, Stella Alasar, Saadia Aleem, Jack Aponte, Kate Atkins and Ali Kronley, Jessica Auerbach, May Baldwin and Elliot Kronstein, Ari Baniyas, Max Barnhart, Tomasz Basink, Leslie Batz and Daniel Wentworth, David Bennion, Amy Berger, Dana Beyer, Big Apple Ranch, Molly Biklen, Richard Blum, Greg Bordowitz, Elizabeth Budnitz, Bree Carlson, Curtis Carman, Mo Cassanova, Janis Walworth, Carol Ann Chavez, Young Choe, M. Samuel Choi, Yvette Choy, Reed Christian and Prachar Lodarbchai, Andrea Clemors, Eden Coughlin, Patricia Crawford, Tadenh Crockett, Paisley Currah, Carrie Davis, S. D. Deitcher, Ryder Diaz, Ruthie Doyle, Emily Drabinski, Martin Duberman, David Duckworth, M.E. Dueker, Phil Duran, Sarah Eisenstein, Eric Estes, Miriam Eusebio, Jennifer Freeman, Belkys Garcia, John Garcia, Chris Robertson, Antonia Gilligan, Mark Goldberg and Isabel Goldberg, Jeanette Gomes, Nick Gorton and Daniel Gonsalves, Sorbrique Grant, Chelsea Green, Jamison Green, Cindy Greenberg, Asha Greer, Vaughn Griffith, Gael Gundin Guevara, Ismalia Gutierrez and Gloria Prosper, Margarita Guzman, Mariam Habib, Ernst Habicht, Jr., Drake Hagner, Christoph L. Hanssmann, K8 Hardy, Marla Hassner and M. Gerard Thompson, Lisa Henderson, Susanna Hernandez, Darby Hickey, Julie Hollar, Carly Huelsenbeck, Talya Husbands-Hankin, Emily Izenstein, Liza Johnson, Bridge Joyce, Cara Kagan, Erica Kagan, Patricia Kakalec, John Kane, Jennifer Klein, Marilyn Kleinberg Neimark and Alisa Solomon, Melissa Kohner, Preeti Lala, Rosa Lee, Tom Leger, Lehman Brothers, Betsy and Gail Leondar-Wright, Donna Levinsohn, Jeff Light, Emily Lindell, Rebecca Lucero, Maria Lugones, Samuel Lurie and Eli Clare, Tomaso Manca, Lee Marcroft and Christine Marcroft, Robert Marshall, Timothy J Mathis, Alexandra Matthews, Rachel Mattson, Molly McClure, Kate McCullough, Mary McCullough, C.K. McGowan and Natalie Fuz, Kieran McGrath, Jennifer Middleton, Ulrike Mueller, Soniya Munshi, National Lawyers Guild, Eleanor C. Nealy, Ross Neely, Gail Nichols, Stephanie Nilva, Juno Obedin-Maliver, Mo Santiago, RJ Thompson, Juli Owens, Camile Pahwa, KJ Pallegedara, Allison Palmer, Julia Parshall and Hilla Katki, Mariette Pathy Allen, Dee Perez, Meredith Pilling, Richard Pleak, Ryan Pryor, Rebecca Quaytman, Sonali Sadequee, David Reed, Laura Reeds, Heath Reynolds, Flavio Risech and Bryan Horch, Mark Rogers, Debra Roth, Emily Roysdon, Sir Real, Diego Sanchez, Stephan Sastrawidjaja, Pella Schafer, Cyn Schneider, Shea Settimi, Hasan Shafiqullah, Josina Shields-Stromsness, Jennifer Shoclay, Killer Sideburns, Dara Silverman, Jason Simon, Sonja Sivesind, Erin Small, Dasha Synder, Jasmine Spacher, Sharon Stapel, Amy Steiner, Ahouva Steinhaus, Abby Stott, Chiemi Suzuki, Ida Swearingen, T.C.N.E. Inc, Alex Teixeira, The Ford Foundation Matching Gifts Program, Lee Thornhill, Susan V. Tipograph, Susan Tollefson and M. Virgil Tollefson, Jaya Vasandani, Velvetpark Magazine, Sara Walker, Joanna Weiner, Erica Weinstein, Ben Weston, Stacey Whitmire, Martha Wilson, KayCee Wimbish, Mee Xione, Dustin Yager, Janna Yisrael, **and thank you to the Foundations that support our work:**

Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice, Child Welfare Fund, Equal Justice Works, Gill Foundation, Kicking Assets, New Voices, New York Foundation, Open Society Institute, Out Fund, Paul Rapoport Foundation, Social Science Research Council, Third Wave Foundation, Threshold Foundation, Tides Foundation, and the Union Square Awards.

Special gifts:

In honor of Candy Darling

In the name of:

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Newsletter editors, contributors and producers:

Jack Aponte, Ryder Diaz, D. Horowitz, Megan Smith, Dean Spade

SRLP Wish List!

Shredder
Filing cabinets
Computer
Polaroid JoyCam Film
8½ x 11 reams of office paper
Ink cartridges for printer,
copier and fax