

DEATH OF A LEGEND

Stonewall Survivor Marsha P. Johnson Remembered

By Max Harrold

"My body felt like it was coming apart. There was blood coming out of my ears, eyes and nose," said lesbian activist "Mama" Jean DeVente, recalling the first fiery moments of the 1969 Stonewall Riots. Stumbling, her face smashed by police, DeVente looked up to see a black drag queen standing before her. "She took off her shirt and wiped my face," DeVente remembered. "Then she said, 'We're not going to take this. We're going to fight.'"

With a *snap!* that epitomized the in-your-face courage of the person who rescued and inspired her that day, DeVente paid tribute to Marsha P. Johnson last week at Greenwich Village's Duane Methodist Church. Joining her was a string of Stonewall survivors and Gay Liberationists gathering to relive many extraordinary flashes in the life of Johnson, who fell, jumped or was pushed into the Hudson River over the July 4th weekend. This dramatic and mysterious demise is a bleakly fitting mirror of the way Johnson lived: fighting, posing and martyred. Only after considerable activist pressure are police considering the reclassification of her death from "suicide" to "cause unknown," conceding the possibility of a gay-bashing that many of her friends suspect.

Casting Johnson as a modern saint and legend of the gay rights movement and downtown arts scene of the '60s and '70s, the memorial brought together many of its remaining characters: local royalty whose influence in the early push for gay rights had international repercussions. The capacity crowd filling the church that rainy Sunday afternoon on July 26 could not have missed the

era's conflicts Johnson epitomized: black, poor, gay, gender-bending, a prostitute and, in the end, sick with AIDS.

Yet Johnson (born Malcolm Michaels in Elizabeth, NJ) bridged the gaps inside the gay community. "Never let it be said that gay men and lesbians can't fight together," declared DeVente. "Lesbians do love gay men." Compared to the mainstream arenas of media and

legislatures in which today's gay political battles are primarily waged, Johnson's brand of fight seems epic and daring. Street compatriot Sylvia Rivera, her face streaked with tears, recalled that Johnson once forced a judge to also put her in jail when Rivera was arrested, to "make sure Sister Sylvia stayed alive." Johnson's sister Norma remembered a lighter side of her brother: "She used to come down the street with that purse and those high heels and my nephew would say, 'There's my Uncle Mikey' (as Marsha was al-

so known). The other boys would say, 'No, that's a lady.'—'No, that's my Uncle Mikey.'"

Johnson, who was 46 at her death, would certainly have relished the anecdote, which calls to mind what she said a decade earlier when asked about a memorial statue in her honor: "You should make it so whenever two people come and look at it, one would have his chin in his hand and study it, and then declare, 'It's a woman!'—to which the other person would respond, 'No, it's a man!'—and they'd just stand there all night arguing."

Indeed, from ancient times, the most spiritually powerful have always been those who could assume different personas, said Rev. Karen Ziegler, who presided at the ceremony. "Why are we so stuck on male and female?" she mused. "Marsha forced diversity."



Marsha P. (as in "Pay it no mind!") Johnson last Easter.

Rick Peters

Artist Bob Leach, who completed a portrait of Johnson only days before her death, echoed this sentiment. Johnson's artistic contribution, he said, was in pushing the boundaries of what people could cope with. Johnson was also one of many who helped lay the groundwork for today's gay rights movement, said longtime friend Agosto Machado. "There's a ripple effect," he noted. "I think it's easier now."

Among those who made their way to the foot of Christopher Street after the service to a spot near where Johnson's body was found July 6 was Randy Wicker, Johnson's housemate of twelve years and the memorial's chief organizer. Lifting the bag of Johnson's ashes above the water, Wicker—until that moment an avowed atheist—announced: "This bag of love we send straight to heaven." Added Wicker, "A lot of people called Marsha a saint. Maybe she was."

While the conditions of Johnson's death remain clouded, Wicker and others anticipate another battle with government officials over plans to install a flagpole in Johnson's memory

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at the river's edge on Christopher Street where her body was found. And anyone who needs further reminder that Johnson's spirit, tenacity and courage need commemorating—not to mention emulating—need only hear what happened the evening of the memorial: George Flinlin, housemate of both Wicker and Johnson, was beaten in the park near their home in Hoboken. "They beat the shit out of him because he is vulnerable and out in society," said Wicker, "just like Marsha was." **Q**