

Social Justice Funders SPOTLIGHT:

The Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice • New York, New York

By Abby Alexanian

With a goal of enacting long-term systemic change, The Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice is the only philanthropic organization dedicated exclusively to advancing LGBTQI human rights and promoting racial, economic, social and gender justice in the United States and internationally. Astraea seeks to uplift communities living at the intersections of multiple marginalized identities, with an emphasis on investing in nascent and emerging groups, supporting movement-building work, and committing to long-term grantmaking partnerships.

In 1977, a group of women sitting around a kitchen table created the Foundation. The founders were determined to build and fund a women's movement that prioritizes the needs of women of color and lesbians. As Astraea grew over the past forty years – now with partnerships in more than 96 countries – it has maintained the core values upon which it was founded.

"[Astraea's] activity is to redirect disparate flows of capital," says Executive Director J. Bob Alotta. "My job is to make sure that the money goes to where it purposefully *isn't* from where it purposefully *is*. It's about redistribution of power."

A small foundation that fundraises every dollar it puts toward its mission, Astraea receives grants from larger foundations, governments, and both large and small contributions from individual donors and families. In 2016, Astraea expended over \$6 million in programmatic work, including funding grants to 190 organizations in 62 countries. It divides the resources evenly between grantmaking and program support, such as technical

assistance and its work to influence philanthropy.

Astraea has always operated on the front lines of social change work for LGBTQI people and communities of color. It often supports groups and initiatives long before their political and social justice victories catch the eye of mainstream organizations. In 1993, for instance, Astraea gave a founding grant to a fledgling organization dedicated to queer liberation and anti-oppression work in the United States South. Supported by funding partnerships from Astraea and other key contributors, Southerners On New Ground (SONG) is now one of the largest social justice organizations in the South.

Astraea's charge, says Alotta, is to convene activists, build movements, and bring together "multiple stakeholders investing in the same vision all from the different vantage points of where we sit." This commitment is clear in CommsLabs (Communications, Media and Technology Labs), one of the Foundation's annual programs, which convenes activists from grantee partners around the world. CommsLabs provides a space for LGBTQI activists to share and learn secure, sustainable and holistic media and communications strategies, strengthen digital security, and amplify their impact through the use of technology. Committed to being indigenous, CommsLabs is a participatory design process in which the program is created by and for the activists themselves. At CommsLabs, one organization's database for tracking anti-LGBTQI hate crimes in Honduras became the inspiration for similar technological solutions in other parts of the world. And this, says Alotta, is why Astraea's ethos as an "activist funder" is about more

than giving a grant: because "it is meaningful to bring people together across geographies and movements and ideologies and identities, and create really creative, collective, innovative spaces for us to work together."

For Astraea, the grant-giving process itself also embodies the social justice ethos of the organization. The Foundation designates the vast majority of its grants as unrestricted, which grantees can allocate for themselves based on where the funding is needed most. Prioritizing unrestricted funds is a political commitment for Astraea, and helps build trusting partnerships, supports grantee autonomy, and builds new systems of power. In this sense, Astraea emphasizes relationships rather than transactions. "And it's movement-building, always," Alotta says.

The Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice

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The Audre Lorde Project • New York, New York

The rise of stop-and-frisk and racially discriminatory policing in New York City in the 1990's meant that neighborhoods were less safe for the people who lived there. This was especially true for queer, trans, and gender-nonconforming people of color.

The Audre Lorde Project (ALP) emerged in response to a rise in state violence, incarceration, deportation, and criminalization of queer, trans, and gender-non-conforming people of color in New York City and particularly in central Brooklyn. Since its founding in 1996, ALP has been one of the few organizing centers in the country lead by Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Trans, Gender-Non-Conforming, Two-Spirit people of color. (Two-Spirit is a term often used by indigenous people to refer to people "who cross social gender roles, gender expression and sexual orientation.") The Audre Lorde Project is named for the Black lesbian feminist, poet, and activist whose life and work embodies the intersectional fight for liberation at the core of ALP's mission. "We started out as a community center," says executive director Cara Page, "and have always been rooted in cultural work and political organizing work that really seeks to transform the level of violence and systemic oppression impacting our communities' lives."

A grantee partner of the Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice for many years, ALP's programming includes political education, leadership development, organizing 101 trainings, and a new program aiming to understand and integrate wellbeing into political liberation work. With over 8,000 members, it has been member-led since its inception with a staff of nine operating four programs.

ALP's early organizing work focused on trans justice – one of the few programs of its kind at the time. ALP, explains Page "held particular role and niche in building political liberatory work in New York City" that focused on the conditions, survival and livelihood of trans and gender-non-conforming people of color.

In response to the rise in discriminatory policing in central Brooklyn, ALP launched a second organizing program in 2006, called Safe OUTside the System (SOS) Collective. The program shed light on the realities of being stopped by the police as a lesbian, gay, bi, trans, Two-Spirit, gender-nonconforming person of color in New York. At the time, explains Page, there wasn't an acknowledgement of "the experience of being gender-profiled, not just racially profiled... and being targeted based on being homeless or living in a street-based economy with a target on your back."

The Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice has been instrumental in supporting and sustaining the Safe Neighborhoods Campaign, created by the SOS Collective to build neighborhood safety using a community-led strategy to create physical safe spaces. Through the Campaign, community members learn how to step up as bystanders and effectively interrupt conflicts without creating more violence or incarceration. Page describes these safe spaces as "storefronts" – bodegas, churches, small businesses – where ALP has run numerous trainings for community members so they are equipped "to intervene on state and interpersonal and hate violence as it's occurring on the streets of Crown Heights and Bed-Stuy, without relying on the police."

A pivot for the Safe Neighborhoods Campaign came in 2014 when ALP conducted an evaluation that included numerous conversations with community members. They discovered that as a result of gentrification and displacement in central Brooklyn the community had lost most of its safe spaces. Realizing that gentrification and displacement are directly responsible for reduced safety for community members, ALP re-launched the Safe Neighborhoods Campaign with an anti-gentrification component as an extension of the existing anti-violence organizing. The revised campaign uses "old school" organizing methods, gathering in members' living rooms and kitchens to identify and train allies and community members to use verbal and physical de-escalation tools. The program brings together members who know their neighbors and identify them as people who would be allies to a trans woman of color, for instance, who was harassed while walking down the street.

Building safety by building relationships, strengthening community connections, and equipping members with tools for interrupting and preventing violence and discrimination is at the heart of The Audre Lorde Project's work to transform a culture of violence from the ground up. "Political organizing," says Page, is "the centrifugal source of transformation for our communities."

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