Crime Victim Impact Statement

FORGE was founded in 1994 to provide support, education, and advocacy to transgender and SOFFA (Significant Others, Friends, Family, and Allies) people in Southeast Wisconsin and beyond. Sixteen years later we still hold Milwaukee-based support groups, but we now do much more. Indeed, we are viewed as one of the nation’s leading experts on violence against transgender people, a status that was acknowledged by the U.S. Department of Justice in 2009 when it awarded FORGE two large, 3-year grants to develop nationwide training, technical assistance, and services for transgender victims of violence and the professionals who serve them.

One of our goals is to help transgender people feel – and be – safe in the world and able to live their lives with as much security, respect, and confidence as any non-transgender person. This goal includes each person having the ability to express who they are, even if that expression does not meet others’ expectations. For sixteen years -- at each meeting, through each email and newsletter, in every phone call, at each event -- we diligently work to make our participants feel respected, safe, and empowered. In our training and advocacy efforts, we work to make the rest of their world more understanding, respectful, and safe.

Andrew Olaciregui’s murder of Chanel Larkin, after discovering she was transgender, has potentially set back our work for decades. A “message crime” like Mr. Olacirgeui’s is extremely effective in sending waves of fear throughout the targeted group. Moreover, like any community, the transgender community uses stories to pass on important knowledge. The story of Chanel's death will be spread for years -- person-to-person, at support group meetings, at transgender events, on blogs, in printed materials, in classrooms. People who had never met Chanel nevertheless have changed their lives because of her death. Since her death in May, we have personally witnessed Milwaukee-area transgender people:

- Buying and/or beginning to carry firearms, which we fear may well be used as often against them as they may be against anti-transgender attackers;
- Expressing fear of and/or curtailing their social and economic activities rather than use public transportation, be in public settings, or even walk in their own neighborhoods; and
- Advising other transgender people to consider hiding their gender identity to be safer on the street, in employment, and in personal relationships.

Long before May 2010, FORGE worked hard to build a community and repair the emotional and physical damages inflicted upon members of our community. We have redoubled our efforts in the hope that we can somehow erase some of the potency of this death by turning Chanel into a symbol of how a community can come together and support each other. We know we can never be completely successful. Andrew Olaciregui will remain a frightening and life-limiting specter in the closets of fear most transgender people live in. Although we recognize and grieve that Andrew is also a victim of the homophobia and transphobia that led him to kill Chanel, we hope you give him a sentence that is commensurate with the devastating and permanent scar he left on the whole transgender community. We hope your sentencing sends a message of hope to the transgender community that transgender lives are as valuable as any other.

michael munson
Executive Director