Wellness Warrior

The pathbreaking actress, producer and activist Laverne Cox wants Black LGBTQ people to be whole—physically, mentally and in the world.

November 15, 2021 By Tim Murphy

Rather than a scolding call-out, it was the gentle call-in heard round the world. In early 2014, while interviewing transgender reality-TV star and model Carmen Carrera on her then talk show, Katie, longtime TV journalist Katie Couric asked Carrera the question every trans person dreads hearing from a cisgender (non-trans) person: “Your private parts are different now, aren’t they?”

Carrera, visibly embarrassed, actually shushed Couric, saying, “I don’t wanna talk about it because it’s really personal.... I’d rather talk about my modeling stuff.”

Couric looked like she suddenly realized she might have misspoken. But she likely didn’t fully understand why until moments later, when Carrera and Couric were joined by Laverne Cox, who was at the time perhaps the most famous trans person in America by way of her groundbreaking role on the hit women’s-prison TV show Orange Is the New Black (OITNB).

Referencing Couric’s inappropriate question, Cox calmly said: “The preoccupation with transition and with surgery objectifies trans people...and then we don’t get to really deal with the real lived experiences, and the reality of trans people’s lives, is that, so often, we’re the targets of violence. We experience discrimination disproportionately to the rest of the community. Our unemployment rate is twice the national average—if you’re a trans person of color it’s four times the national average. The homicide rate in the LGBTQ community is highest among trans women.”

Cox then told the story of 21-year-old Islan Nettles, a Black trans woman who the previous year had been brutally beaten into a coma (she later died) on the street in Harlem by a young man who had catcalled her and then erupted in rage when he learned she was trans. “This is the reality of so many trans women of color’s lives, whose lives are in danger simply from being who they are,” continued Cox. “And by focusing on bodies, we don’t focus on the lived realities of that oppression and discrimination.”

To Couric’s credit, she owned her gaffe, later calling herself “an insensitive buffoon.” She even went on to produce a documentary showing the full scope of trans lives and invited Cox back on her show to apologize to her and continue the conversation.

But more important, the moment with Couric was among the first of many times the Alabama-born

Cox would use her new platform not just to show off her fierce hair, wardrobe and shoes but to eloquently and passionately advocate for the physical and mental well-being of LGBTQ folks.

Since finding fame in her early 40s, Cox has evolved into a high-profile advocate for transgender people, especially trans women of color.

But she doesn't advocate just for transgender folks. The Emmy-winning Cox, who recently executive-produced the acclaimed trans documentary Disclosure and starred in the films Promising Young Woman and Jolt, has continuously stepped up for issues of health equity and justice for all LGBTQ folks.

Rare is the Hollywood glamazon who can also discuss health care policy like your favorite friendly public health professor. But that's Cox, whether it's on her iHeart podcast, The Laverne Cox Show, in her Twitter or Instagram feeds, in live interviews or even in perfect sound bites while twirling on the red carpet.

Certainly, she's become rich enough for her own health care access not to be the issue it might have been for her in earlier, struggling days. So why the continued passion? The answer may lie in something she told Johnson & Johnson in late 2019 about appearing on the reality show I Want to Work for Diddy in 2008 (well before OITNB made her a household name).

"For the first time, I had a national platform," she said. "I remember saying to my brother, 'Well, I'm already Black and trans, and that's a lot for people.' He said, 'If you have this platform, why have it—if you're not going to use it to say something meaningful and be about something that is bigger than you?'"

She's been doing just that ever since.

From HIV/AIDS to Resilience to Trans Justice

Cox was talking to Johnson & Johnson on the occasion of her becoming the first spokeswoman for the Band-Aid RED campaign to end the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Proceeds from purchases of J&J's distinct red Band-Aid bandages were donated to The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. Although HIV negative, Cox spoke passionately about how the epidemic was "a human health crisis that has greatly impacted my life."

Of course, the disease for years has hit hardest the very communities Cox is a part of—LGBTQ, Black, transgender. Indeed, Black gay men and trans women have the highest rates of HIV in the United States.

"It's always affected people I know," she continued. "And my entire life, there's been so much stigma around it. As I came of age, I remember thinking that I was going to get AIDS and die. I always thought, If I feel this way, I must not be the only one who feels this way. The way to deal with the shame and trauma, in part, is to talk about it and find ways to heal."

LGBTQ mental health is another advocacy priority for Cox. She has been extremely vocal about

being in therapy herself, largely to work through what she has called the trauma of internalized shame and self-hate related to the bullying she endured as a child for being effeminate and has often suffered simply for being a trans woman walking the streets of New York.

On Instagram Live in May, Cox talked about working on “trauma resilience” in therapy, which, in her words, is “the process of moving from what’s wrong with me to what happened to me to what’s right with me. And what’s right with me is the resilience piece.” It had been healing and strengthening for her, she said, after processing what she’d been through, to focus on the ways she’d been strong and resourceful through it all.

And on her podcast, Cox often has deep conversations with leading Black therapists, thinkers and writers, such as professor Cornel West, PhD, and #MeToo founder Tarana Burke, about putting trauma in the context of larger forces, such as multigenerational racism, misogyny and transphobia. Her aim is to help Black LGBTQ folks understand that therapy and support groups can help empower them to rewrite messages from the outside world that they have internalized.

Laverne CoxMark Sagliocco/Getty Images

Standing Up for LGBTQ People—Trans Folks, Especially

Cox has often championed the health and well-being of the entire LGBTQ community. She testified

on Capitol Hill in support of the LGBT Data Inclusion Act, which would require government surveys, including the Census, to collect data on people's sexual orientation and gender identity alongside other demographics. "LGBT people exist, we are a vital part of the fabric of this country, and we just want to be counted," she said in her testimony.

Cox spoke out again last year on the morning show The View after the Supreme Court, newly slanting conservative in the wake of appointments under ex–President Trump, surprisingly outlawed LGBTQ employment discrimination.

"I'm shocked," she said, smiling, noting that the ruling also reflected similar protections in health care. (This was at a moment when the Trump administration was simultaneously attempting to roll back health care and housing protections for trans people.)

But she also noted, "I would like to remind people that just because we have policies in place that protect folks, it doesn't necessarily mean that the hearts and minds of citizens are changed. We have to do that work within ourselves, within our communities, with our friends and families and in the media."

Yet given that trans folks, especially Black trans women, remain the most economically and physically vulnerable people in the LGBTQ community, it's no wonder that Cox becomes most passionate when she's talking about the health and welfare of her own trans sisters of color.

She has become perhaps the most vocal and consistent voice against the global epidemic of often fatal violence against mostly Black and Latina trans women, unyielding in her conviction that the brutality is rooted in a society that tells straight men they are "less than a man" if they are attracted to a woman who turns out to be trans.

In 2019, on the news show Democracy Now, she said, "It's really hard for me to continue to talk about the murders of trans women of color.... This was a reality in my life in 1998 [when she began medically transitioning], that there were trans people being murdered all around me and this insane fear, Will I be next?... And for my entire life as a trans woman, for 21 years, I have been hearing about, witnessing, going to memorials, going to Trans Days of Remembrance...I don't even actually have words for the trauma of that.... And we live in a culture that consistently stigmatizes trans people, tells us that we aren't who we say we are."

In the past year alone, despite a new presidential administration that is thankfully LGBTQ-affirming in the Obama-era tradition, Republican-driven bills in several states have attempted—sometimes successfully—to make it illegal for health providers to give young people trans-affirming care. Such care includes puberty blockers, which delay the onset of developments that trans kids often find deeply upsetting, such as breast growth in cisgender girls or body hair and deeper voices in cisgender boys.

One such bill passed in Arkansas this year but was blocked by a federal court before it was set to go into effect by the end of July.

In addition, other bills aim to block trans students from playing on sports teams that match their gender identity.

Cox has spoken out powerfully against such legislation. Talking to Variety in June 2021, she said of the people behind such bills, “What they’re trying to do is dehumanize these children, which is so heartbreaking…the fervor with which they’re going after the[m].”

She indicated the illogic of opposing both the right of trans kids to play on the team of their choice and their right, in consultation with their parents, to access puberty blockers. “They’re saying trans girls can’t play sports and also trying to deny those girls and boys access to the…care that would actually halt puberty. So it’s like, make it make sense!”

Then she added: “Those folks who say they’re allies of trans people who don’t have all the information, I say [to them] with love, let’s get the information.”

Always Leading With Love

Maybe Cox has proved such an effective advocate for LGBTQ justice because she truly believes in the best in people, the idea that if folks are approached with kindness rather than shamed and canceled on social media, there really is a chance that hearts and minds will change—and legislation will follow.

As she said on The View, “So often when folks feel called out and accused of being racist or transphobic…[they] are on defense…and not in a place where we can fully hear each other. And so as corny…as it sounds, we have to create [a] safe space so that each human being feels…that they’re safe, so that we can have conversations with love and empathy. So I’m not a fan of cancel culture. I’m a fan of giving people space…so they can take risks and make mistakes—and be transformed.”

Maybe that’s the word that best sums up Cox—transformation. There’s her own personal transformation from fear and shame to resilience and self-love, which she has shared so generously with her fans. Then there’s that same individual transformation that she champions for her LGBTQ brothers and sisters, particularly her fellow trans women of color.

And finally, with both compassion and sheer passion, Cox lobbies ceaselessly for the kind of political and societal transformation Black folks need to thrive—regardless of what gender they identify as or who they love and desire.

Look for Cox in the forthcoming series Inventing Anna and Clean Slate. Follow her on Twitter @Lavernecox and Instagram @lavernecox.

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