

Document Set - Miss Major Griffin-Gracy

Document 1: Biography

Miss Major Griffin-Gracy was born on October 25, 1940, in the South Side portion of Chicago. Growing up in a middle class family, Griffin-Gracy participated in drag balls in her hometown. While not having the language to express that she was transgender in her youth, Griffin-Gracy came out to her parents, and faced mistreatment and threats of violence from peers and extended family members. This prompted her to move to New York City in the early 60s.



When she arrived in New York City, it was buzzing with activist demonstrations and organizing. Soon she was surrounded by demonstrations against the Vietnam War, an emerging Women's Rights Movement, and activism regarding Black Civil Rights. During this time, Griffin-Gracy relied on sex work and theft to support herself, and was at times homeless. Her experience as a trans sex worker in New York City placed in her close proximity to other trans pioneers, such as Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera.

Griffin-Gracy was also a frequent patron at the Stonewall Inn. The night of the uprising, she was meeting a friend when the police raided the establishment. Griffin-Gracy was involved in the brawl initially, but was knocked unconscious by a police officer and taken into custody with a broken jaw.

Immediately following the Stonewall Rebellion, Griffin-Gracy was sent to prison to serve a five year sentence. After being released in the late 1970s, she eventually moved to California with her son, where she became involved in nonprofit work related to the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and 1990s. Aside from her AIDS activism, she also advocated for prison abolition. In 2005, she served as the director of the Transgender, Gender Variant and Intersex Justice Project (TGIJ), an organization focusing on ending injustice of currently and formerly incarcerated trans, gender nonconforming, and intersex, people of color. Griffin-Gracy retired from the position in 2015.

Griffin-Gracy has been awarded numerous accolades for her activism by LGBTQ+ organizations. In 2015, *Major!*, a full length documentary about her life and work, was released. Griffin-Gracy now lives in Little Rock, Arkansas where she founded the House of GG, a retreat house for trans women to learn about community organizing and activism to help trans communities where they're from.



Document 2: Interview with Miss Major Griffin-Gracy, NYPL Trans Oral Project, December 16, 2017

Lewis: I'd like to ask you more about transgender services, more recently. But I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about the Stonewall Riots and what that was like.

Griffin-Gracy: You know what? It was scary, it was something that happened all the time, where the police come in and are shutting down bars. And it happened all across the United States, not just New York, everywhere. They come, take that night stick, hit the door down, the lights come on and you're streamed out. That's the routine, that's what they did, everybody knew it.

Uh, they checked for ID to see if minors were in the bar. And the routine started but nobody would budge, everyone would just look at each other. And when we got our nerves together and everybody decide "Okay, we're going to go out", a fight ensued and all this crap that I've been hearing through the years, "Oh someone threw a shoe, someone threw a molotov cocktail, someone did something else, someone slugged a cop." I don't know what happened! All I know is, a fight ensued. And we were kickin' their ass. So much so, they backed into the bar for protection. And then the next thing you knew, the riot squad was there and then it was on. And I had learned from some friends in Chicago, if you're ever in a situation with a cop, do something to piss him off enough to knock you out. Cause if they don't knock you out, they will continue to beat your ass till they break bones in your body. Hit a rib, if they puncture your lung, you die. So I spit in his-snatched this cops mask, spit in his face, he knocked my black ass out. And he dragged me to the fucking truck and threw my ass in there. But I'm still here.

It was a mess. And the interesting thing was it went on for days, wasn't just one night, "Oh Stonewall, that one"—it went on for three or four days. It, it went on. And the funny thing was I remember hearing in my head people yelling from their apartments "The girls are kicking the cops asses over at Stonewall!" Well y'all weren't down there fighting! You were yelling from the fucking safety of your window, while we were getting brutalized, you know, down there. But when a parade came, couldn't find us anywhere! And I forget the name of that child that had the blue Cadillac, you know some little right white boy that buys the blue Cadillac, that was always by Stonewall. But um, in his car, in the parade, was a couple of the drag queens that he used to like, that performed. None of my girls! You know, Sylvia wasn't—I didn't see Sylvia there, in the front, where she should've been.

And it's not about me, I don't give a shit whether they acknowledge or know about me, I mean, it has to do with, Sylvia and Marsha were trying to take care of the community before we really knew that we needed to be taken care of. They had a vision, they saw what was coming. And they did their best to protect us. To make us aware of it. And so, my involvement with them was always occasional. Because of the era and the times—I was an uptown girl. I lived up in the 80's off of Amsterdam. They were Village girls. And the girls in the West or East Village were the East Village girls. And there were Harlem girls. And so, even though we all had some interconnection through somebody, they really fought to stabilize us. And so it behind that it became a matter of what do we do to keep this going. You know, to maintain it.



I didn't know a thing about that fucking parade till I saw it on TV. Someone should've told us, or made us aware of what was going on. You know and it was just, it was a hard pill to swallow. And one of the things, as a black person I learned that history is one big lie. It has to do with the person that's writing it, not the facts that went on. And perception plays 90% part in what that asshole puts down on paper. So, why believe it...or get involved? One of the things I think about is if you were to take a history book and pull the bullshit out of it, find the truth, snatch out all the bullshit that's in there, then you're going to wind up with two or three pages. All that 475,376 pages is crap. It's smoke that they're blowing up people's ass. And the sad thing is, people are buying it. If they don't buy it then that shit doesn't get [inaudible]. So it's a thing of making sure that you know, I'm not gonna lie to my girls [inaudible]. If you ask me something I'm gonna tell you the truth, you know. And it has to do with my perception of things, not theirs or what someone else has said. They aren't me. They weren't in my skin at that time. They didn't perceive anything that I perceived. And yeah, I'm older and yeah memory adds stuff or takes away stuff. Well that's just what it fuckin' does. I'm still here and fuck you.

Discussion Questions:

1. How does Griffin-Gracy remember Stonewall?
2. How are the police portrayed in Griffin-Gracy retelling?
3. According to her, how does race play a role in how history is retold? How has race played a role in how Stonewall is remembered?