

THOSE WE'VE LOST

Lorena Borjas, Transgender Immigrant Activist, Dies at 59

She helped transgender women in Queens contend with human trafficking, health issues and possible deportation. Her death was attributed to the coronavirus.



By **Daniel E. Slotnik**

April 1, 2020

This obituary is part of a series about people who have died in the coronavirus pandemic. Read about others here.

When transgender women in Queens needed a safe place to be tested for H.I.V., Lorena Borjas turned her home into a clinic. When others were arrested and charged with prostitution, she bailed them out. When some faced deportation after an arrest, she created a nonprofit group to arrange for their legal representation.

Ms. Borjas, an indefatigable activist who drew on her own experiences as an immigrant transgender woman to help others, died on Monday at a hospital in Brooklyn. She was 59.

Chase Strangio, a friend and colleague, said the cause was complications of the coronavirus.

Ms. Borjas became a guardian angel of sorts for the transgender community in Queens, helping women deal with sex trafficking, police harassment, substance abuse and health problems.

Cecilia Gentili, a friend, said in a phone interview that Ms. Borjas's efforts on behalf of other transgender women went beyond those of most nonprofit workers.

"If one of the girls got arrested for doing sex work, she would answer the phone at 3 in the morning and at 8 in the morning she would be in court with a lawyer and with the money to bail you out," Ms. Gentili said.

Ms. Borjas's efforts ranged from the broad-focused, like starting nonprofits and organizing protests, to the very personal; Ms. Gentili said she handed out condoms to sex workers on Roosevelt Avenue in Queens. She added that Ms. Borjas was interested in breaking the arrest-jail-deportation cycle.

In 2011 Ms. Borjas and Mr. Strangio founded the Lorena Borjas Community Fund to help transgender people embroiled in that cycle. Mr. Strangio said the organization had put up bail for more than 50 people over the years and raised more than \$45,000 to cover different costs.

“But this is just a fraction of what Lorena herself did,” Mr. Strangio wrote in an email. “She probably helped over 100 trans people obtain immigration status or other legal support.”

Born in Mexico City on May 29, 1960, Ms. Borjas came to the U.S. when she was 20 and eventually earned a green card through an amnesty program under the Reagan administration. She was convicted of several charges related to prostitution, which were later vacated by Queens Criminal Court because, the judge said, she was forced into prostitution by human traffickers.

But other convictions remained on her record until Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo pardoned her in 2017.

“With this pardon granted, I will no longer have to go to sleep at night worrying that I will be deported back to a country that is no longer home,” Ms. Borjas told the Transgender Law Center that year. “I will be able to live my life without stress and fear of immigration, and I will be able to continue doing the work I do and help more vulnerable transgender women.”

Ms. Borjas became a U.S. citizen last year.

Ms. Gentili said that Ms. Borjas’s survivors include a partner and family in Mexico and California.

The Coronavirus Outbreak >

Frequently Asked Questions and Advice

Updated April 4, 2020

- **Should I wear a mask?**

The C.D.C. has recommended that all Americans wear cloth masks if they go out in public. This is a shift in federal guidance reflecting new concerns that the coronavirus is being spread by infected people who have no symptoms. Until now, the C.D.C., like the W.H.O., has advised that ordinary people don’t need to wear masks unless they are sick and coughing. Part of the reason was to preserve medical-grade masks for health care workers who desperately need them at a time when they are in continuously short supply. Masks don’t replace hand washing and social distancing.

- **What should I do if I feel sick?**

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