

JOYCE HUNTER

b. April 26, 1939

GAY PIONEER

“Growing up in the Bronx and on the streets of the Bronx ... you hear everything. And then you can get your first word of faggot and queer. It scared the hell out of me.”

She helped organize the first National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights.

Joyce Hunter is a gay pioneer who helped organize the first National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights and cofounded the first public high school for LGBTQ students.

Hunter survived a difficult early life, growing up in the Bronx, New York. The child of an unwed Orthodox Jewish mother and an African-American father, she spent much of her childhood in an orphanage. She married and became a mother in her 20s. By her 30s she had established herself as a trailblazing LGBT activist.

In the 1970s, based on the black civil rights movement, activists sought to create a national march on Washington for lesbian and gay rights. In the summer of 1978, San Francisco Supervisor Harvey Milk assumed leadership of that vision. After his assassination in November 1978, approximately 300 activists, Hunter included, convened the Philadelphia Conference to fulfill Milk's dream of a march on the National Mall. Plans proceeded under the joint leadership of Hunter and Steve Ault.

On October 12, 1979, more than 100,000 activists attended the National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights. The demonstration helped define a national civil rights movement.

Also In 1979, Hunter became a founding member of the Hetrick-Martin Institute in New York, created chiefly to serve at-risk LGBT youth. As the Institute's director and clinical supervisor of social work, she helped create a counseling program, a drop-in center and an outreach project.

In 1985 with the Hetrick-Martin Institute and Steve Ashkinazy of the Stonewall Democratic Club, Hunter cofounded the nation's first LGBTQ high school, the Harvey Milk High School, in New York City's East Village. The same year, as a co-leader of the Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights, Hunter helped successfully lobby New York City Council for a gay and lesbian nondiscrimination ordinance—one of the first municipal ordinances of its kind in the nation.

Hunter has served as Human Rights Commissioner of New York City and on the New York State Governor's Task Force on Lesbian and Gay Concerns. She founded the Women's Caucus of the International AIDS Society.

Hunter earned her undergraduate and master's degrees in her 40s and her doctorate in social work in her late 50s. She is an assistant clinical professor of sociomedical sciences in psychiatry and psychiatric social work and a research scientist at the HIV Center at Columbia University. She conducts HIV behavioral research and is the principal investigator of a community-based HIV prevention project for LGBT students.

Hunter donated her collection of LGBT civil rights papers to the archives of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Community Center of New York City. The “Making Gay History” podcast series featured her story.

Now a great-grandmother, Hunter resides in Queens, New York.

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