

# STACEY MILBERN

b. May 19, 1987

d. May 19, 2020

## DISABILITY RIGHTS ACTIVIST

*“I would want people with disabilities 20 years from now to not think that they’re broken.”*

Stacey Park Milbern was a civil rights advocate best known for her role in establishing the disability justice movement. She proudly identified as a queer, *crip* (*slang for disabled person*) woman of color.

The child of a white U.S. army serviceman and a Korean mother, Milbern was born with muscular dystrophy—a serious, progressive, degenerative disease. Though she began life in Seoul, South Korea, she spent most of her childhood in Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

Milbern was in grade school the first time she realized she had “a totally different reality.” She could walk on her own, but she was unsteady on her feet. When she fell in the school restroom, the other little girls just continued to chat, oblivious to her predicament.

**The New York Times called her a “warrior for disability justice.”**

As she matured, Milbern had trouble establishing independence as a physically impaired person confined to a wheelchair. “The world literally isn’t made to house us, it feels sometimes,” she said. By the age of 16, she had become a full-fledged disability activist. She secured a role as the community outreach director of the National Youth Leadership Network and later founded the North Carolina Leadership Forum and Disabled Young People’s Collective.

In 2004 the governor of North Carolina appointed Milbern to the Statewide Independent Living Council, where she served for six years with a two-year overlap on the North Carolina Commission for the Blind. Thanks largely to her diligence, North Carolina mandated disability awareness instruction in its public schools. In 2005 Milbern established the disability justice movement as an “intersectional approach to achieving access” for people of color, the LGBTQ community and other traditionally excluded groups.

Milbern graduated from Methodist University in 2009. She moved from her parents’ home to San Francisco at age 24, because of the city’s reputation for disability access. She earned her MBA from Mills College in Oakland, California, in 2015 and took a leadership position at the Center for Independent Living in Berkeley.

A gifted writer and blogger, Milbern rebuked the mainstream disability movement for marginalizing LGBTQ people and racial minorities and criticized telethons for their pity ploys. She faulted doctors for recommending unnecessary surgeries in pursuit of a “good body” versus a good quality of life.

Despite her declining health, in 2019 Milbern organized the distribution of generators to people on ventilators during the California wildfire power shutoffs. Just months before she died in 2020, she mobilized a group to help protect homeless people from the novel coronavirus.

Milbern died on her 33rd birthday from surgical complications. The New York Times published her obituary.



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