

CECILIA GENTILI

b. January 31, 1972

d. February 6, 2024

TRANSGENDER ACTIVIST

“Equality is an endless cake. The more who eat from it, the more there is to share.”

She was a transgender activist and actor who advocated for under-represented minorities.

Cecilia Gentili was a transgender activist and actor who advocated for undocumented immigrants, sex workers, and people struggling with addiction.

Born in Argentina to Italian and Argentinian parents, Gentili endured sexual abuse from a neighbor throughout her childhood. At age 12, she came out as gay. Her grandmother helped her explore her gender expression. When Gentili did so publicly, she faced attacks from the locals as well as the police.

Gentili moved to the city of Rosario, Argentina, to attend college. She met people there who identified as transgender and adopted the term for herself, identifying as a woman for the first time. When she was 26, she moved to Miami, Florida. An undocumented immigrant, she worked in the sex industry until she was arrested for prostitution and placed in a men's jail.

Gentili moved to New York in 2003. Broke, she turned again to sex work. She was arrested for drug possession in 2009 and sent to Rikers Island, a violent New York prison complex. She was abused and assaulted in both men's and women's jails.

After her release, Gentili spent 17 months in an addiction recovery program. She was granted asylum and legally changed her name. She remained in New York, where she interned at the LGBT Community Center before finding a job at the Apicha Community Health Center as an HIV peer navigator and, eventually, as the health program coordinator. She went on to become the Director of Policy at GMHC, a nonprofit AIDS support organization. Around this same time, and until 2021, Gentili guest starred on the television show “Pose,” set in New York during the AIDS crisis. Her other acting credits include the film Sex(ual) Healing (2021).

In 2019, Gentili cofounded a consulting firm assisting immigrants, sex workers, trans women of color, and incarcerated people. That same year, she cofounded the DecrimNY campaign to decriminalize sex work. She also became a board member of the Stonewall Community Foundation, where she served until her death. In 2020, Gentili and another trans woman unsuccessfully sued the Trump administration for permitting discrimination by medical providers against LGBTQ+ people.

Gentili received the Callen-Lord Community Health Award in 2019. Her memoir, “Faltas: Letters to Everyone in My Hometown Who Isn't My Rapist” (2022), won the Stonewall Book Award. In 2023, her autobiographical play, “Red Ink,” opened Off Broadway, and she cofounded the first all-trans music festival, “Transmissions Fest,” to benefit LGBTQ+ charities.

In 2024, Gentili suffered a fatal overdose from fentanyl-laced heroin. She is survived by her longtime partner, Peter Scotto.



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