

MARSHA P. JOHNSON

Transgender African American Activist (1945-1992)



Malcolm Michaels, Jr. left his home in Elizabeth, New Jersey to transform into “Black Marsha” on the train into New York. Survival after a permanent move there in 1966 was difficult. At times she waitressed or panhandled, but mostly she worked the streets. Along the way Black Marsha became Marsha P. Johnson. When she was asked by a judge what the “P” stood for, she retorted “Pay it no mind” – which was the philosophy of her incandescent life. Marsha was memorably present at the Stonewall Riots in 1969 where any number of actions have been attributed to her legend – including shimmying up a lamppost to drop a heavy weight that shattered a police car’s windshield. In the early 1970s Marsha, along with her friend Sylvia Rivera, co-founded Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (S.T.A.R.) – one of the first transgender rights organizations in the country. In spite of her influence and popularity, Marsha’s life was by no means easy. Breakdowns, religious visions, health scares, numerous threats by disgruntled johns, and run-ins with the law served as a dark counterpoint to her buoyant personality and unabashedly colorful attire. Naturally theatrical, she appeared regularly with the flamboyant performance group, the Hot Peaches Review, and was photographed by Andy Warhol as part of his “Ladies and Gentleman” Polaroid series in 1974. In spite of all she had endured, Marsha was a bright light of love and acceptance in a world that was anything but welcoming. She was a *survivor*. So when her body was found floating in the Hudson River after the 1992 New York Pride Parade – a death the authorities hastily declared a suicide without any forensic evidence to support the claim – her family and friends were outraged. Subsequent private examinations of police reports, sealed records, and interviews have revealed clues that point to possible foul play and hints of a cover-up. A re-opened investigation changed the cause of her death to “undetermined.” The mystery of what – or who – took the life of Marsha P. Johnson remains unsolved.



Lesson Plan

Level 1: Contributions Approach

1. Activate Prior Experience: What do you know about Marsha P. Johnson?
2. Read the biography above and additional resources at <https://legacyprojectchicago.org/person/marsha-p-johnson>. Why was Johnson’s involvement in the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (S.T. A. R.) in the 70’s important?
3. Read http://www.gbtqarchive.com/ssh/gay_liberation_front_S.pdf
Group Discussion: The Gay Liberation Front advocated for civil rights protections for sexual minorities. Why? Do you think GLF failed Transgender people? Why or why not?
4. Extend Knowledge: Are you able to identify a Transgender African American activist in our society today? Explain their impact on our society.

Level 2: Additive Approach

1. Read https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marsha_P._Johnson#Early_life. Describe some significant early experiences that formed Johnson’s values and identity.
2. What qualities did Johnson exhibit while living on the streets? Describe the types of things she experienced.
3. Website Investigation: Read about Sylvia Rivera and discuss the common beliefs held by her and Johnson <https://legacyprojectchicago.org/person/sylvia-rivera>.

Level 3: Transformational Approach

1. Marsha was transformed into a legend of the Stonewall Era. She is said to “have thrown the first brick”, though she, herself denied it repeatedly. Has this myth served to obscure or enhance the valuable work she did *after* Stonewall?
2. View this clip <https://youtu.be/jcUODgiJ5NI>. In your opinion, was her death a suicide? Why or why not?
3. Johnson’s life and tragic ending have become extremely important in LGBTQ history. Why? What do you think she would want emphasized in any memorial to her legacy?

Level 4: Social Action Approach

1. Johnson and Rivera are remembered for being activists during the Stonewall era. Why are these two particular individuals still venerated today? View <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/new-york-city-monument-will-honor-transgender-activists-marsha-p-johnson-and-sylvia-rivera-180972326/>
2. How would you advocate for transgender, gender-non-conforming, and non-binary youth in your school, your community and society in general?
3. What would you tell lawmakers who oppose legislation that protects the entire LGBTQ community from discrimination in every walk of life? How would you address resistance to Transgender inclusion and acceptance among LGB people?