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RWU Community Invited to Honor the Lives of Transgender People

S.A.F.E. hosts a week of events to remember victims of transgender-related violence and suicide

Kate Bornstein, a transgender author, intellectual, activist and performance artist, will offer a mix of comedy, anecdotes, monologues and readings from her acclaimed LGBTQ books on Thursday, Nov. 20.

November 18, 2014  |  Sabrina Polin '17

BRISTOL, R.I. – Student organization Sexuality Advocacy for Everyone (S.A.F.E.) is hosting a week of celebration aimed at honoring the transgender lives that have been lost to violence and suicide and educating the campus community on issues in this vulnerable, marginalized population. To acquaint the campus community with the diversity of gender identities, S.A.F.E. has expanded this year’s program to include a weeklong series of events culminating with a special event on Transgender Day of Remembrance on Thursday, Nov. 20.

For those unfamiliar with the term “transgender,” S.A.F.E.’s events will explore trans identities and how to engage respectfully with people identifying as transgender, according to American Studies Professor Laura D’Amore, a coordinator of this year’s programming.
“Transgender Day of Remembrance commemorates the lives of trans people that have been lost to murder or suicide, and brings attention and awareness to the struggles they face living in a rigidly binary world that polices the bodies of people who do not ascribe to the norms of masculinity and femininity that are associated with the sex they were assigned at birth,” D’Amore says.

Bringing attention to the transgender lives lost to violence and suicide is a weighty, difficult topic to approach for some, but still a crucial subject that must be explored, says Aley Dzwill, a senior psychology major and president of S.A.F.E.

“This day is important to the Roger Williams community because it tells our trans-students on campus that they’re important and that they’re a part of the community,” she said. “It makes others aware of what being transgender means, what violence has been perpetrated against trans people, and how people can be more mindful and respectful of people’s identities.”

While Transgender Day of Remembrance is commemorated differently around the world, RWU is taking a celebratory approach this year with events that are open to trans allies as well. A documentary about the struggles of two transgender women was shown Monday evening, followed by a discussion with the film’s director. On Wednesday, a transgender networking dinner will be open to everyone in the Upper Commons.

The main event, taking place on Thursday’s Transgender Day of Remembrance, welcomes Kate Bornstein, a transgender author, intellectual, activist and performance artist. Her performance, “Men, Women, and the Rest of Us,” at 7 p.m. in the GHH Atrium, will offer a mix of comedy, anecdotes, monologues and readings from her acclaimed LGBTQ books.

Dzwill hopes that this year’s programming will offer students and faculty a better understanding of all the different identities to which people ascribe. To that end, S.A.F.E. will raise awareness about gender fluidity via a table in the Commons on Thursday to distribute “pronoun cards” on which students can write their preferred identifying pronoun(s) such as “he” or “she.”

“Hopefully, the cards will inspire people to be more mindful of thinking about their own personal identities and the identities of other people,” Dzwill said. “I want the people who may already do that, or who identify with these unfamiliar pronouns, to feel safe and represented.”

In addition to honoring transgender victims of violence and suicide, S.A.F.E.’s events will celebrate the richness of gender diversity, with a focus on gender fluidity, gender queer, and transgender identities.

“These events will be educational but this is also social justice work,” D’Amore says. “This is doing the work that needs to be done so that all human beings have a right to live freely, with dignity and without fear or threat, and to have their basic human needs met.”