



## **Sankofa Collective Northwest: On Splitting From PFLAG, QTPOC Centered Organizing, And The Patterns Of Privilege**

by Sossity Chiricuzio, PQ Monthly

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PFLAG Portland Black Chapter was serving a unique and vital function, and now it's gone. The Sankofa Collective Northwest has relaunched in its place, delighting many local communities with its mission and the services and programs it will bring, but there is more to this story than the budding good news. The reasons behind the split from PFLAG highlight critical issues in understanding race relations in the local LGBTQ community, and in the power structures of many programs meant to support it.

Dawn Holt, President of PFLAG Portland, told *PQ Monthly* “In October 2015, PFLAG Portland Black Chapter’s Coordinators informed the Board that they were ready to become independent, and began the transition with the full support of the PFLAG Portland Board. Before they were able to complete the transition, they ran out of grant funds to support the new staff they had hired in preparation for their independence.”

The staff in question, who had spent endless hours (many of them already unpaid,) nurturing this burgeoning chapter and the community of QTPOC and their families they served, found themselves laid off, with little notice or explanation. Within a few days all their access to money and resources

were cut off; and the infrastructure for their programs was removed, leaving the communities that they serve in disarray and without the critical resources needed to reduce the disparities and improve the lives of Black LGBTQ people in our community.

Khalil Edwards, the Co-Director of Sankofa, and previously of PFLAG PBC, shared his thoughts about the split. “It was very upsetting to say the least. For years we have had this incredible partnership with PFLAG Portland and particularly Dawn Holt, someone I called a friend. It has felt like the ultimate betrayal, and at the high cost of undermining Black LGBTQ leadership and hurting a marginalized and vulnerable community that depends on us.”

The extent of the discord can be seen in an email thread between Edwards and Holt about wrapping up final details of budgets and donations, which ended with this line from Holt: “I am now officially done,” she says. “May you not cause as much discord, harm and hurt at the Q Center as you did with us.”

When asked what she meant by that, Dawn replied in vague reproach and pleasantries. “While we are disappointed that conversations were shared with you out of context, and at a time of stress for all who grew this chapter from its beginnings, we at PFLAG Portland do indeed wish the new Sankofa Collective Northwest well. We know they will continue to serve their community and carry this important work forward under their new name.”

This kind of refusal to acknowledge personal responsibility is part of the overall problem in this split, and also in situations that arise in many of the organizations and nonprofits that serve our communities, in Portland, but also the nation. If a direct conversation about conflict, or about the difference in lived experiences, resources, and privileges can’t even be had, how can those issues ever be addressed? Khalil was disappointed by that exchange, but is more concerned with the problems, and communities, that have been left without support.

“Things didn’t end well, and that is sad,” explained Edwards. “I can understand her feeling hurt and harm, but I know all of us worked very hard to move forward together. Beyond her hurt, beyond my hurt, is the hurt and damage to the wider Black LGBTQ community. We work and hear from folks daily seeking housing, struggling to make ends meet and put food on the table, being kicked out of their homes and being attacked at school...the list goes on. We hear from folks daily sharing that they were ready to leave Portland before they found us, they didn’t think anyone cared about their issues. That is the hurt and harm I am concerned with. We know what an important role we play in this community and that is something that should be afforded the importance and severity it deserves.”

Onesha and her wife Keesha, say that they came to PFLAG in 2011 feeling very broken. They were recovering addicts, homeless, and out of work. Although the recovery community helped them get

clean and stay clean, they weren't really supportive of the couple's relationship. They described PFLAG Black Chapter as a God-Send, encouraging the couple to be happy in their relationship and to work on their problems. Even more important to them was the safer space it gave them to celebrate their love. They spoke of how they were the first Black Lesbian couple to get married in Portland, and how they now have good jobs, a nice home, and a healthy relationship.

"Khalil Edwards and his mom Antoinette [co-founder of PFLAG PBC] have been extremely supportive of us every step of the way," explains Onesha. "September 1, 2016 I celebrated 5 years clean, and 10-11-16 my wife Keesha Dumas will celebrate 5 years clean. Because of the role models we found in PFLAG we learned how to, as Antoinette would say, fight fairly. It's hard to be a Black person in America period, but to be Black and Gay well that is a whole other level of oppression. PFLAG Portland Black Chapter gave us a Safe Haven so to speak, Khalil has been the social activist who was always inspiring us to show up and fight for our rights, and Antoinette is like a loving mother. I spend 30 minutes with her and I always leave feeling so confident, as if I could take over the world."

The couple are also now board members at Sankofa, and were previously on the PFLAG PBC steering committee. When I asked them how the decision making process happened around dissolving PFLAG PBC, and if they were included in that, Onesha replied "I have had the chance to interact with Dawn several times over the years and I got the impression that she was a dedicated ally; I am not privy to every detail of the break, so I will not bad mouth this woman. I will say that I wish she would have contacted the steering committee and had a sit down with us before some of these changes were made. I am very sad to see things end in this way, and I hope with Sankofa we continue to create safer spaces; and celebrate love. Love for others and more importantly self-love, and that's what I found at PFLAG Portland Black Chapter. No matter where we go, what name we use, as long as the Black LGBTQ community keeps the love, I know we will be just fine."

Along with the communities they serve, several of the staff members were left scrambling for personal resources as well, as there were no severance arrangements. This left Olivia Olivia, Communication Specialist, without an income, and shortly thereafter, no place to live. The housing market in Portland continues to price people out of the very areas they work and serve in, further complicating the ability for QTPOC to survive in this city that was literally built on a racist model, and in which historically Black neighborhoods are being gentrified at ever increasing speeds.

"I am appalled by Dawn's carelessness in the matter," said Olivia, describing Dawn's quick decisions and closing of accounts. "It is probably the most unprofessional way I've ever seen a leader of a major nonprofit behave - laying off staff with less than a week's notice, leaving us houseless, with no safety net or severance. My problem isn't that there was a disagreement between how the organization should be run - but that Dawn would take such an extreme step in light of her first disagreement with the only organization specifically serving the Black LGBTQ community."

“This is not how adults resolve disagreement,” she added. “This is not a responsible timeline for resolving an organization's conflicts. This is not the way a cis het white ally should behave, or for that matter any director or president of PFLAG. It is my opinion that she is not suitable to lead the organization and that PFLAG National and the LGBTQ community and allies as a whole should condemn her actions and ask that she step down immediately. We deserve better and this is a chance to learn.”

When Dawn was asked what she--as a white, heterosexual, cisgendered person--saw as her role regarding interacting with and serving communities that are so different from herself, and if she pursued ongoing racial/social justice training, or involvement in activism beyond her volunteer work for PFLAG, she again sidestepped the question.

“One email does not tell the whole history of PFLAG Portland's chapters, which have a strong, demonstrated, decades-long history of supporting Portland's diverse LGBTQ communities.” Holt said. “The chapters' members and leaders--families, allies, and LGBTQ people--are proud of this shared, groundbreaking work.”

This isn't a question of just one email, however, or even just one opinion. Multiple Black LGBTQ folks spoke to Holt directly long before we questioned her about it, and the pattern of deflection and disrespect from her in those emails, texts and voice-mails are clear, and familiar. Rather than speaking to her own personal experience and acknowledging the direct hurt and miscommunication that had been conveyed to her, and then using that as a means to move forward into a better understanding and possible future healing or collaborations, she folded herself into the safely anonymous ‘we’ of the organization as a whole and tacitly denied responsibility.

This is a common pattern when it comes to privilege. Failing to step outside of our own experience and seek out training or knowledge that would lead to more informed and intersectional activism. Failing to realize that ‘*ally*’ is a verb, not a noun, and not a designation we can give to ourselves. It is hard to thank someone for pointing out where you've gone awry or hurt them; hard even to admit it; sometimes almost impossible to believe it's a real thing because it doesn't suit our picture of ourselves, or how the world works. Hard, but a requirement for genuine change.

The point of PFLAG Portland is to serve and advocate for the LGBTQ population of Portland as a whole; to be a source of compassion and connection and understanding. Their heart is in the right place, but to say that every community can be equally served with the same model is to miss a chance to help achieve actual equity in resources and support. It also fails to acknowledge the fact that both the working class queers of color who were staffing PFLAG Portland Black Chapter, and much of the community they serve, are not living in the same world as someone who can afford to volunteer their time. There are also cultural considerations, and disproportionate rates of harm and danger involved in being Black and LGBTQ, that require different kinds of support than the general network allows for.

Justin Pabalate, Co-Executive Director of the Q Center--where PFLAG Portland Black Chapter was located, and where they are looking forward to housing Sankofa as well--feels that "Conflict is natural and expected. Especially given that we LGBTQIA+ people of color live in white town Portland, OR."

"Am I surprised that there was conflict between QTPOC leaders and an allied white organization?" he added. "No. We may be connected by our shared experiences around sexual orientation, but the beautiful and sometimes painful reality is that we are also more attuned with intersectionality. Because racism runs deep and in typically unseen ways, QTPOC community members are usually the ones who have to do the education, the activism, and suffer through our allies' learning process."

"Conflict is easy," he concluded. "Honoring space for healing, owning mistakes, working towards long term resolution, those are all hard. It's inevitable that our white allies will make mistakes and cause trauma, but in my experience as a biracial person (which is different than those of black community members,) I've found compassion for them and the remembrance of what good they have brought helps me heal and forgive. There is a time for hurt and for healing. It's important for us, QTPOC community members, to remember that we're here for each other and to reach out to one another for support. When allies make mistakes, like we all do, my hope for them is that they reflect, learn and do better."

Transformative social justice works best when we all work together, but the system is so imbalanced that it often becomes a case of asking too much of the people that are oppressed, and too little of the ones who benefit most from the way things are. Sankofa Collective Northwest is choosing a path that is rooted in their own community, their own lived experiences, and their own understanding of how to make that work. Centering the work they need to do around the communities they serve, and constructing systems to keep it sustainable. Pushing us all forward with their momentum and self-respect, though it should never be their job to do so.

***Sossity Chiricuzio is a writer and columnist based out of Portland, Oregon. She is a regular contributor for PQ Monthly and focuses on social justice, communication, community, and changing the world. You can follow her adventures online @sossitywrites and find more at [sossitywrites.com](https://sossitywrites.com).***