

# Social Justice Funders SPOTLIGHT:

## The Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice • New York, New York

With a goal of enacting long-term systemic change, The Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice is the only philanthropic effort dedicated exclusively to advancing LGBTQI+ human rights and promoting racial, economic, social and gender justice in the United States and internationally. Astraea seeks to uplift communities living at the intersections of multiple marginalized identities, with an emphasis on investing in nascent and emerging groups, supporting movement-building, and committing to long-term grantmaking partnerships that shifts power and agency to the communities Astraea supports.

In 1977, a group of women sitting around a kitchen table imagined supporting and funding women's movements that centered the priorities of women of color and lesbians—and Astraea was created. As Astraea has grown over nearly a half century, it continues to fund at the intersection of feminist activism and LGBTQI+ rights, maintaining its core founding values to support marginalized and under-resourced communities working to advance social justice. Since its founding, Astraea has distributed almost \$60 million to activists in more than 120 countries around the world.

For Astraea Executive Director Joy Chia, the COVID-19 pandemic and the racial justice movement following the murder to George Floyd, helped “reaffirm the importance of building and shifting power to communities that are impacted the most by decisions that are being made without their consultation.” The pandemic, Chia noted, underscored for her and Astraea staff not only the “existing structural inequalities, both in terms of economics, social and political power” but that “the communities that we work with, the queer, trans, communities of color in the US and globally... how invisible our communities are in

government responses in moments of crisis.” Across the globe, Chia saw how some governments used the pandemic as “an excuse” to “continue to control and regulate” LGBTQIA+ people’s “bodies and behavior.” Also, during COVID lockdowns, the absence of welcoming community spaces that many of Astraea’s grantees had created, were particularly devastating for LGBTQIA+ people in a climate of continuing marginalization and violence.

A public foundation that fundraises every dollar it puts toward its mission, Astraea receives grants from larger foundations, governments, and both large and small contributions from individual donors and families. It provides resources for both general operating support for nonprofit organizations, provision of technical assistance and efforts to influence philanthropy.

Events over the past few years, motivated Astraea to, in Chia’s words, “think more broadly” about what a “foundation dedicated to social justice” should do, particularly in times of crisis. Providing longer-term funding, and general operating support rather than smaller, short-term project-oriented grants became priorities. As authoritarianism grows around the world, Astraea is also committed to continue funding in oppressive regimes around the world. In 2021, a majority of Astraea’s international grantmaking was in nations with obstructed, repressed or “closing” civil societies.

Such funding decisions, Chia noted, are not just “moral acts,” but vital ones, since it is in these spaces where activists are often forced to become the most “innovative and creative” and most clear about their purpose as they “risk everything in order to continue their work.” It is these activists, she noted, that may have the most to teach us, not just in terms of strategies

and tactics “but about the resilience of human beings.”

Astraea has always operated on the front lines of social change work for LGBTQI+ people and communities of color. It often supports groups and initiatives long before their political and social justice victories catch the eye of funders. In 1993, for instance, Astraea gave a founding grant to a fledgling organization dedicated to queer liberation and anti-oppression work in the U.S. South. Supported by funding partnerships from Astraea and other contributors, Southerners On New Ground (SONG) is now one of the largest social justice organizations in the South.

For Astraea, the grant-giving process itself also embodies the social justice ethos of the organization. The Foundation designates the vast majority of its grants as unrestricted, which grantees can allocate for themselves based on where the funding is needed most. Prioritizing unrestricted funds is a political commitment for Astraea, and helps build trusting partnerships, supports grantee autonomy, and builds new systems of power.

“What we found is that activists and organizations who don’t feel as if they’re isolated, who are working in community, who have holistic security practices who see themselves as being embedded in very people-centered movement have been the most capable of continuing their work,” Chia said. Providing flexible, long term funding, Chia said, is one of the most important of Astraea’s practices, “because our grantees working in these spaces are people-centered community centers, they are also best places to make decisions about how resources are allocated.

## Astraea Foundation GRANTEE SPOTLIGHT:

### The Audre Lorde Project • New York, New York

The rise of stop-and-frisk and racially discriminatory policing in New York City in the 1990's meant that neighborhoods were less safe for the people who lived there. This was especially true for queer, trans, and gender-nonconforming people of color.

The Audre Lorde Project (ALP) emerged in response to this rise in state violence, incarceration, deportation, and criminalization of queer, trans, and gender-non-conforming people of color in New York City, particularly in central Brooklyn. Since its founding in 1996, ALP has been one of the few organizing centers in the country lead by Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Trans, Gender-Non-Conforming people of color. The Audre Lorde Project is named for the Black lesbian feminist, poet, and activist whose life and work embodies the intersectional fight for liberation at the core of ALP's mission.

A grantee partner of the Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice for many years, ALP's programming includes political education, leadership development, organizing 101 trainings, and the integration of healing and wellbeing into political liberation work. The Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice has been instrumental in supporting ALP's campaigns and its community centered strategies, including the more recent centering of work around healing, which includes the presence of community-based healers at events and direct actions.

"I do think that the pandemic helped more people see that healing and promoting wellbeing amongst the community is pretty essential to movement work," ALP's Deputy Director India Harris said. "When you think about our community members who have trouble finding that welcoming and acceptance and belonging in a lot of institutionalized health-related spaces, it is vital that we are part of providing that healing safely and in public." Advocacy and going up against the status quo through protest and direct action is often draining, Harris said. ALP, Harris noted, is not a service provider, but ALP staff subscribe to the idea not "ask anyone for anything until you ask them how they are doing. And finding ways to meet folks' needs."

ALP counts more than 8,000 community members, who help shape the agenda and work of ALP, including community based solutions embodied in ALP's campaigns and community-based responses. "We have to be grounded in people's day to day experiences and understand those experiences," said Harris, who became dedicated to social change work after an AmeriCorps year of service with the Alliance of AIDS Services in North Carolina and experience as youth and young adult ministry in the Unitarian Universalist Church.

Community voices, for example, engendered an expansion of ALP's organizing and neighborhood-based education work related to public safety. In the mid-2000s, ALP conducted an evaluation that drew from numerous conversations with community members. The conversations revealed that as a result of

gentrification and displacement in central Brooklyn the community had lost most of its safe spaces. Realizing that gentrification and displacement are directly responsible for reduced safety for community members, ALP relaunched its Safe Neighborhoods Campaign with an anti-gentrification component added to existing anti-violence organizing.

ALP currently operates three major programs, "all shaped and evolving because of the wisdom of our community members," Harris said. Safe Outside the System (SOS) convenes members to discuss trends in policing, violence and solutions and also publishes guides with proven strategies and practices that help community members to stay safe at parties and other gatherings that don't rely on police. For example, the "Safe Party Toolkit," draws upon the wisdom and experience of three generations of ALP community members. It contains concrete advice about how to intervene in violence, how to support survivors of violence and how to create a community atmosphere where violence does not thrive. Through member convenings and mobilization, TransJustice addresses political issues affecting trans and gender non-conforming people, including job and housing access, the need for Trans-sensitive healthcare, HIV-related services, and resisting police, government and violence. Finally, 3rd Space provides space for LGBTQ+ people who "struggle with issues around employment, education, health care and immigration status." It is a space to "give and receive sustainable support" and create innovative solutions while in community.

In recent years, ALP has worked to raise 30 percent of its budget from community members at the "grassroots level. This fundraising shift, Harris said, also benefits community members directly since many foundations and government agencies do not provide support for the type of organizing and direct action shown to be most effective in protecting and enriching the lives of ALP's community members.

"We see people really coming through, even if its small dollar donations that add up," Harris said. "It's a way to really engage folks, so they know that this is their community, they have a say, a stake. It's helping to reinforce that basic truth that this is their space."

*The revised version of this spotlight was compiled by Abby Alexanian, Susan Eaton and Brian Stanley. The original version was published in 2017.*

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