

TRANSWAVE JAMAICA
2025



THE TRANSGENDER HISTORY OF JAMAICA

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*"People who doh know me, tink dat I lost.
Because we is the backside di decent
people doh scratch"*

-Hibiscus, Get Millie Black (2024)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 03

THE BEGINNING OF VISIBILITY 04

TERRORISM IN PARADISE 06

A BRIGHTER LIGHT, A NEW ERA 13

APPENDICES 22

INTRO DUCTION



Transgender Jamaicans have largely been left out of documented history. This largely has to do with the omission of West Indians in global queer history, the relatively few historiographies of the LGBTQ+ community in Caribbean history; and transgender invisibility within the Caribbean queer community. As the sociologist Dr. Mimi Sheller would sum up: “one of the first greatest silences in Caribbean history is the invisibility of queer subjectivities”. Still, despite these setbacks, the Jamaica transgender movement today has emerged as one of the most close-knit communities on the island.

THE BEGINNING OF VISIBILITY

In the 1970s, when the queer activism movement emerged in Jamaica, the trans identity was not given much focus within the advocacy space. Still, it was not until the late 1990s, that some of the first stories of transgender Jamaicans were brought to the forefront in conversations surrounding the lived experiences of minority groups. One of the first persons to expound on this experience was Nalo Hopkinson. In 1998, she wrote the short story, 'Fisherman' for the anthology, 'Tongues on Fire: Caribbean Lesbian Lives and Stories' edited by Rosamund Elwin. In her contribution, she featured the non-op trans character, Kelly. However, it seems that Kelly's identity as a transgender person was received differently by readers. According to Hopkinson in an interview with Kofi Campbell,

"... Kelly, my protagonist in "Fisherman," is perhaps straight. He's attracted to women, not to men. Because he's non-op trans, many reviewers want to read him as female. It baffles me, since the whole point of the story is about him finding ways to inhabit his maleness in circumstances where his options for doing so are limited"



Also in 1998, Patricia Powell published 'The Pagoda' where she spotlighted the experience of a transgender Chinese immigrant man living in Jamaica in the late 1800s.

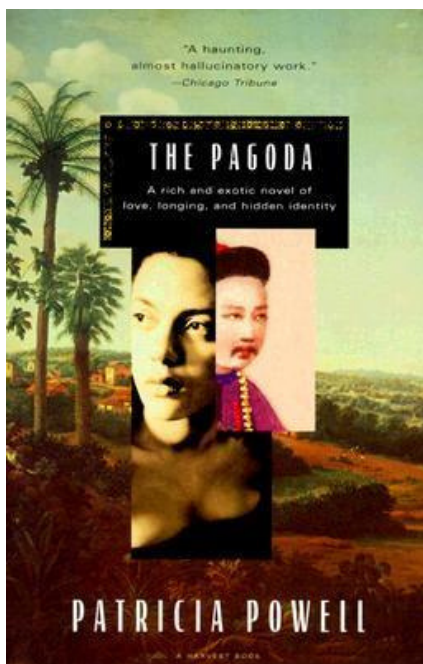


Image 1: Cover of *The Pagoda* - Patricia Powell

"To find the stories of how transgender Caribbeans have struggled with, survived, and supported the colonial Caribbean requires creative engagement. As Powell draws her historical fiction from the contradictions and absences of the colonial archive as well as from the logical and fantastic imagining of a Jamaican past from the perspective of the present moment, she engages in the kind of invention that is necessary in order to consider the "real" histories of transgender Caribbean subjects"

A few months after these publications, the Jamaica Forum for Lesbians, All-Sexuals and Gays (J-FLAG), was formed. Then a few months later in 1999, Macey and Rodd became the first transgender Jamaicans to appear on national television when they were guests on the program, "Man Talk" in 1999. Still, despite these moments of transgender visibility peering through the mainstream, its advocacy space was derailed by a widespread attack on queer communities on the island where transgender and gender non-conforming Jamaicans faced the brunt of that.

TERRORISM IN PARADISE

In the new decade, one of the first direct attacks on transgender Jamaicans would come in the form of cartoon commentary and “letters to the editors” published in the island’s newspaper.

These journalistic outputs largely reinforce harmful notions and stereotypes of transgender Jamaicans and the wider LGBTQ+ identity. These have been and are still to this day being published even though the editorial boards of these newspapers offer a contrasting view. For example, the Jamaica Observer printed editorials throughout 2012 about supporting LGBTQ+ rights. However, at the same time, its popular cartoonist dubbed ClovisToons created homophobic and transphobic drawings published that year. As a 2014 Human Rights Watch report states,

“A cartoon published in the Jamaica Observer in December 2012 shows a child unperturbed by men dressed in intimidating traditional holiday costumes, while in the next panel, he flees in terror from a gay man in a stereotypical dress.”

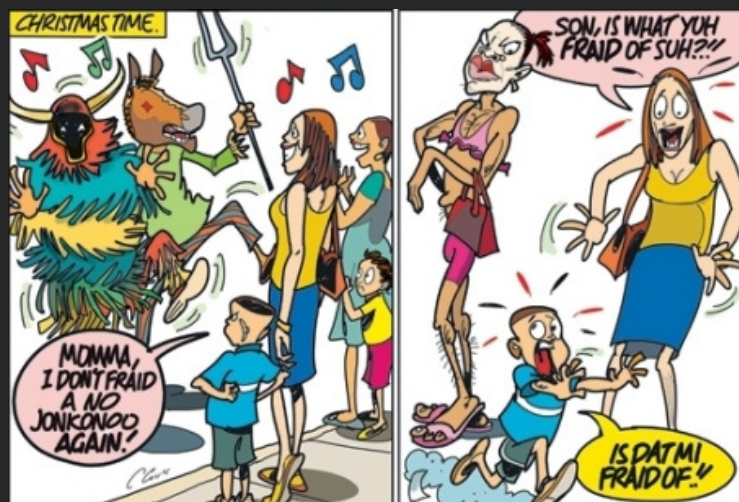


Image 2: Clovis Toons – Jamaica Observer, December 2012

Then there were the physical attacks on the community. By 2007, J-FLAG reported that mobs attacked at least 98 queer persons between February and July 2007 alone. In a 2012 interview with The Guardian, head of J-FLAG from 2004 – 2008, Gareth Henry stated,

"I was with J-FLAG for four years. During that time, 13 of my friends were killed."

By the next decade, the attacks on transgender Jamaicans became more paramount. As reported by Donovan A. McFarlane in his paper, "Culture, Morality, and The Law: The Treatment of Homosexuals in Jamaica", the following instances took place:

1. "On March 6, 2016, in the City of New Kingston, a transgender woman was severely beaten and left for dead in a gully after attending an event at the National Stadium. She and her friends had stopped at a gas station, where they were blocked by a group of men in a vehicle"
2. On June 15, 2014, in the City of May Pen in the Parish of Clarendon, a transgender teen, who was in the process of transitioning her appearance, was attacked when she attempted to purchase lip gloss at a store. A mob outside of the store chanted "Kill her and set her on fire", in Jamaica Patois and the police were called. The mob was difficult to disperse, and the teen only escaped with help of the store workers and two police officers who ensured the teen's safety".

There have also been reports of transgender persons being discriminated against in housing, work, and educational opportunities. Still, the level of discrimination faced by these Jamaicans is highlighted by the existence of a community of homeless young queer persons living in the Shoemaker Gully in New Kingston. Over time, they became known as the “Gully Queens.”



Image 3: Frank, P. (2016). These Are The Fearless LGBTQ Youth Who Live In Jamaica's Sewers, HuffPost

Visual documentation of these persons from local and international media houses, as well as testimonies from interviewees done over the years, showed that many of these young persons are trying to survive in a society that tells them they should not. Many have been made homeless after being kicked out of their familiar home. Excluded from society due to their sexuality and class – some, their gender- these young persons have found a community in each other. Unable to find work due to discrimination, some survive by selling confectionery, alcohol, and drugs while others participate in sex work. According to the 2017 study, “Factors Associated

with Sex Work Involvement Among Transgender Women in Jamaica: A Cross-Sectional Study” by Carmen H. Logie et al, transgender women are the most vulnerable to the risk associated with sex work in Jamaica. As it states,

“Transgender women involved in sex work may experience exacerbated violence, social exclusion, and HIV vulnerabilities, in comparison with non-sex work-involved transgender women... Participants reporting transactional sex also reported increased odds of incarceration perceived to be due to transgender identity, forced sex, homelessness, and lower resilience, in comparison with participants reporting no sex work involvement”



Image 4: Frank, P. (2016). These Are The Fearless LGBTQ Youth Who Live In Jamaica's Sewers, HuffPost

Still, just by their presence, they represent something bigger – the importance of communities and solidarity in times of despair. They also forced Jamaica to acknowledge the fact that transgender persons exist and despite a society governed by colonial, homophobic, and misogynistic laws and values, these people exist. In his 2021 collection of essays, ‘Things I Have Withheld’, Dr. Kei Miller details his experience of spending a few days with some of these persons. In his recollection, he writes:



Image 5: Cover of Kei Miller's Book, "Things I Have Withheld"

"I have a sense of this moment. This moment when the homeless boys of New Kingston suddenly entered Jamaica's consciousness. And it was this that did it –their sudden refusal to be cowed or bullied. Their insistence on standing up proud in their high heels and their wigs and their tight dresses...Homelessness is a state they fall in and out of. But when it is night, they come back here to see each other, to see their family. They are sisters."

Of note, even though Dr. Miller referred to these displaced youth as boys, many in this community identify as transwomen, non-binary and non-conforming persons.

TRANSWAVE JAMAICA 2025

In July 2013, the community was thrust into the national limelight when Dwayne Jones, after attending a party in drag, was brutally attacked by a mob of persons, shot, ran over with a car, and dumped by the side of a road. A year later, in July 2014, on the one-year anniversary of Jones's murder, an investigative special was aired on the popular television programme, All Angles. Spearheaded by the host Dionne Jackson-Miller, the documentary highlighted one of the first coverage of transgender issues on the island.

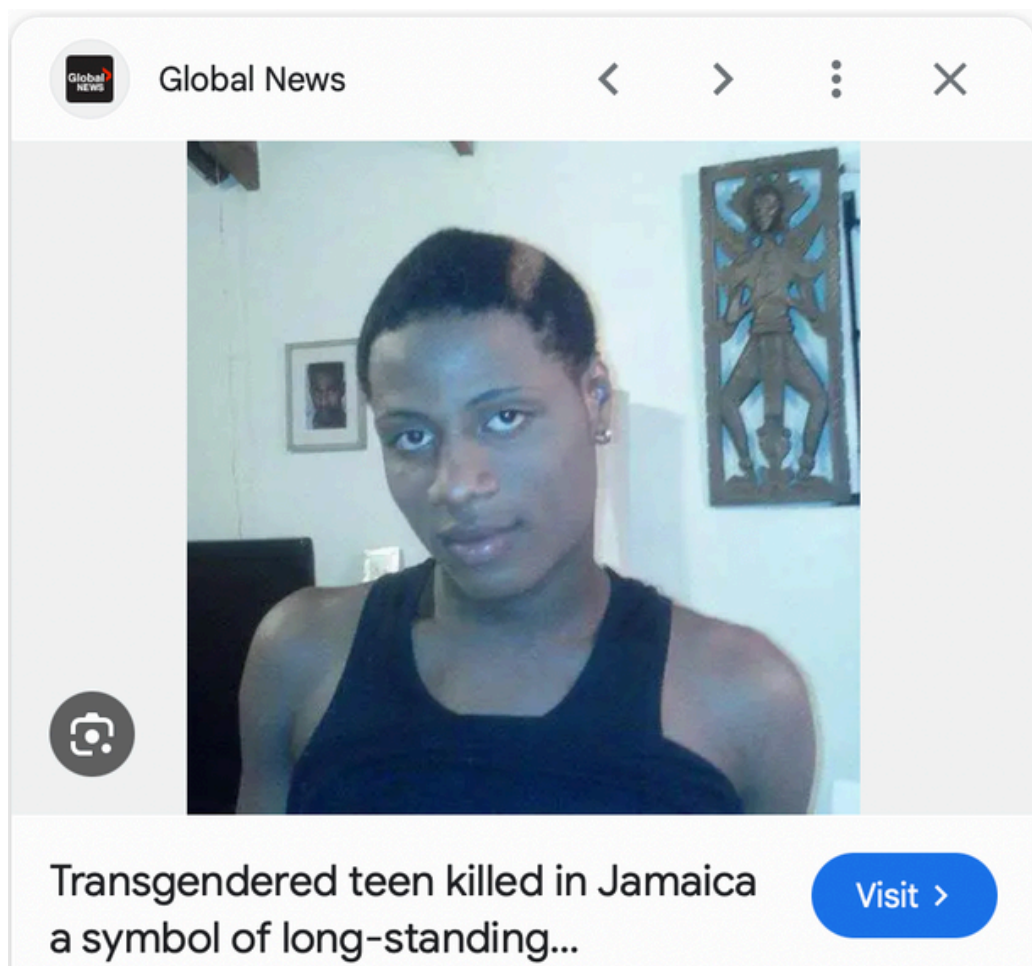


Image 6: Search results from Google on Dwayne Jones, Jamaica



However, even though Jones' killing was condemned by the government and civil society, as things usually are, but no one was ever charged. Two years after Jones' killing, two persons in the gully were murdered in their sleep. Then in the wider community, by 2016, on March 6 in New Kingston, a transgender woman was severely beaten and left for dead in a gully after reportedly attending an event at the National Stadium. By this time, in November 2016, British musician Ray BLK, featured four displaced transgender youth and their reality, in the music video for her single, 'Chill Out'.

Still, it was the attack and killings of Jones and other transgender and gender nonconforming Jamaicans and their reality that saw a call to action to have more structured advocacy around the unique experiences of transgender Jamaicans. This came in the wake of then-popular fashion blogger, Ashley Gordon, exclusive one-hour interview about her life as a transgender woman living in Jamaica on Impact with the acclaimed journalist, Cliff Hughes. As such, by the mid-2010s, Akilah White and Neish McLean created a blog to address the experiences of transgender Jamaicans. Born out of this blog would be the first transgender advocacy organization in Jamaica – Transwave. As Kei Miller stated:

"It frightened the men who were really just cowards, who had come just to have a little bit of fun, just to rough up the sissy boys a little, as if to prove their own masculinity, and who came back instead with all the bruises, all the cuts on their own skins... This wasn't the script they had come to know. They did not know beautiful gay boys could stand up for themselves. They did not know beautiful gay boys could fight back."

A BRIGHTER LIGHT, A NEW ERA

By this time, there was a series of revolutionary events, relating to LGBTQ+ rights that was occurring on the island. In 2010, the Colour Pink Group was founded to combat the discrimination and poverty of displaced queer men and queer male sex-workers in Jamaica. Then a year later, the women-centric Aphrodite's PRIDE was formed to advocate on the behalf of the Jamaica LGBTQ+ community. Both organisations championed transgender rights where they both had transwomen at the helm.

By January 2013, J-FLAG launched their "We Are Jamaicans" Campaign. It was the first time in the organisation's history that there was a campaign with several LGBT Jamaicans openly sharing their personal experiences living in Jamaica.



Image 7: JFLAG 2013, We Are Jamaicans Campaign

In 2013, the government also expanded the 2013 Jamaica National Crime Victimization Survey to include questions about crimes believed to result from assumptions or knowledge about the sexual orientation of persons.

In May of that year, the first staging of Larry Chang Human Rights Symposium occurred. This was followed up in 2014 when the Private Sector of Jamaica (PSOJ) launched the “Respect Jamaica” campaign to promote human rights. In the same year, UTECH Cares was created to promote tolerance and respect among Jamaicans.

These campaigns came in the wake of an incident at the university in 2012 which saw an alleged gay student being beaten by two guards employed by Marksman Security.



Image 8: Clovis Toons - Jamaica Observer, November 2012

In 2015, the feminist organisation, WE-Change, was founded to advocate for LGBTQ women and non-binary people. The founding members include Latoya Nugent, Rochelle McFee, and Paige Andrew. Months later, the first national LGBTQ Pride Celebrations took place. Pride JA was held from August 1 to 6, under the theme: The Pride of a People: Breaking the Rules of Oppression. At its opening ceremony, the then Mayor of Kingston & St Andrew, Senator Dr. Angela Brown-Burke, and the then Justice Minister, Mark Golding, issued a public endorsement of the Pride celebrations. Today, August 1 to August 6, has become known as Pride Week, in keeping with the nation's identity celebrations: Emancipation Day and Independence Day. It was during this Pride celebration that Transwave was formed. The organisation was formed by Neish McLean, directly out of a training facilitated by WE-Change in partnership with J-FLAG under the JASL-UN Trust Fund project to address violence against women and girls and has already been making waves. In just three months, TransWave got the ball rolling on spotlighting transgender issues in Jamaica. One of their first initiatives was the social media campaign, 'Our Voices, Our Stories', which features four transgender persons.

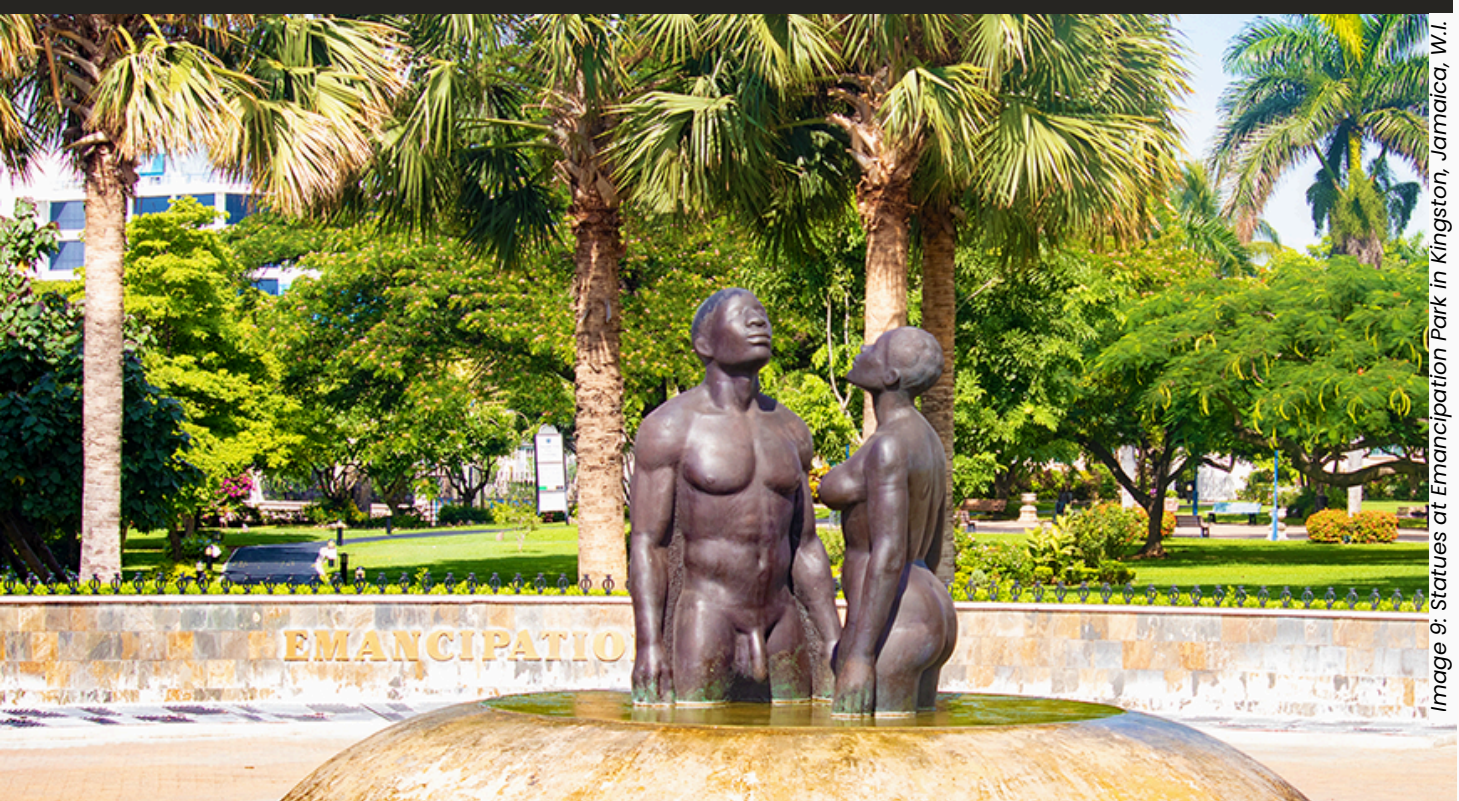


Image 9: Statues at Emancipation Park in Kingston, Jamaica, W.I.

By October, twenty-eight healthcare workers and other stakeholders which included Medical Officers, Adherence Counselors, Behaviour Change Communication Officers, and Peer Educators were trained over two days in providing HIV and other health services to transgender and non-gender-conforming persons. Then, a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for healthcare workers regarding the treatment, care, and support for LGBT clients was developed under the Mitigating Risks Project by hired consultant Dr. Geoffrey Barrow.

Then in 2017, with Neish McLean as the executive director (most notably at this time Mr. McLeans was the only transgender man heading a Caribbean transgender organization), the organisation embarked on several projects. They expanded their activism to provide therapeutic services to improve the mental health and wellness of the trans community as well as established a partnership with Jamaica AIDS Support for Life to conduct three trans sensitivity training for sixty-five of their staff. However, the highlight of the organisation year was its TransActive initiative which was aimed at building a sense of community through fitness, wellness, and camaraderie. This included movie nights, TransActive runs, yoga sessions, and the Pride Wellness Walk.

Then in 2019, TransWave partnered with JFLAG to host sensitization sessions and peer educator training sessions to equip thirty-three individuals with relevant information to make informed decisions about the use of PrEP. Alongside this was the social media campaign, #PrEPResponsibly aimed at sharing information about PrEP. In July, UNAIDS Jamaica supported

TransWave's Transgender Health and Wellness Conference. The event helped launch a toolkit on how healthcare providers can provide holistic, non-discriminatory services, along with dialogue around the rights and inclusion of transgender people. The organization has also met some employers to gauge the degree of acceptance for the inclusion of transgender workers. In the same year, transgender Jamaicans shared their experience when they took part in the Editor's Forum which resulted in a front-page story and four stories in The Jamaica Gleaner.

Then the advocacy within the transgender community would play a vital role in responding to the pandemic upheaval within the transgender community in 2020. With joint efforts, Equality For All Foundation Jamaica (otherwise known as EFAF or #EqualityJA), TransWave, WE-Change, and Equality Youth JA, created Together We Can, the collaborative campaign, #TogetherInCOVID. The campaign, which lasted from April 14 to August 30, was intended to provide support for LGBT Jamaicans – the most vulnerable of which were trans Jamaicans.

Then in 2021, the transgender NGO advocacy space would undergo a change. In that year, TransWave Jamaica became a full advocacy-focused organization. In that same year, the role of executive director shifted from Neish Mclean to Renae Green. The organization prioritized research, policy, and legislative changes, strengthened its partnerships with other civil society organizations and bilateral partners, and broadened the scope of our work to include talking about trans issues more fully and holistically. By 2023, under the revised dispensation of the Equality Group, EFAF, TransWave Jamaica and Equality Youth Jamaica moved into a new permanent Rainbow House in June 2022, launched on February 28, 2023.

In the wake of social media and new media, more LGBTQ+ groups and communities emerged. Specific to the transgender community, the Cari-Trans Support Group Jamaica (CTSG) was established in May 2023 to create an inclusive space for the trans-masculine community. A few months later, the organisation's founder, Glynn Devon Bryan, was voted the LGBT Person of the Year 2023 by EFAF. Then the forum Queerly Stated was created to build upon the lived experiences of queer Caribbean people. It emerged in 2020 out of the hashtag #RubbinCratchiz, which was meant to be a one-off Twitter Spaces conversation, to center the experiences of queer dating in the Caribbean. There is also the literary community, Rebel Women Lit, which focuses on the literary works of queer, non-binary and women authors. In 2023, the organisation, alongside Queerly Stated, launched the 'Under The Sycamore Tree' podcast to highlight feminist and queer social movements within the Caribbean. Other podcasts like, the Fish Tea Podcast, Drunk Development Podcast, and the Haters Anonymous Podcast, feature queer Jamaicans giving their commentary on society, pop culture, and politics.

The transgender community has also found spaces across the island. Most notably the restaurant, Chilitos Jamexican, Regency at Terre Nova, AC Hotel, and Jamaica Style Villa, have become popular hotspots for transgender Jamaicans. There have also been numerous queer-focused parties that have become a staple on the local scene for the community. In 2022, Queertego was created out of a need for more queer-friendly spaces outside of Kingston and served to build a community that supports, advocates, and organise events for queer Jamaicans in Western Jamaica.

Also, in 2022, Connek JA, a grassroots organization and resource center, providing networking and socialization opportunities for queer Jamaicans, founded by Christina Udemzue and Chaday Emmanuel, organized Jamaica's first public ball. There is also the United Trans Collective which combines art, fashion, activism, and social justice to advance the lives of transgender Jamaicans. Members include: Emani Alotta Punani Edwards, Kyym Savage, and MX Leo Williams.

Today, almost 25 years ago after Macey and Rodd became the first transgender Jamaicans to appear on television, the Jamaican transgender experience is being told on the international stage – thanks to the Marlon James written-HBO original TV show, 'Get Millie Black'. The show features several queer characters including the transgender woman, Hibiscus, who is played by Chyna McQueen – who herself is a transgender Jamaican woman. This makes Hibiscus the first fictional representation of the Jamaica transgender experience on screen and McQueen the first transgender Jamaican in a major acting role. Other members of the transgender community including, Kyym Savage and Emani Alotta Punani Edwards, also appeared throughout the series. Transwave also assisted in the recruitment process for 'Get Millie Black' while its director Renee Green served as a gender specialist, stylist and script doctor.

TRANSWAVE JAMAICA

2025

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Image 10: Scene from HBO's Investigative Series, "Get Millie Black"

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Despite the major accomplishment with the island's transgender community, Hibiscus is a displaced woman who resides in the famous Kingston gully, thus bringing to light that the issues of transphobia, displacement, risk of sex work, lack of monetary resources, discrimination, and many other disparities that still plagued the community, where many have fled the island for their safety and better opportunities.

In recent years, numerous lives have been killed due to transphobia. These persons included Chanel, Blue Ivy, Chenille, Peaches, Bebe, Ranika, Bam Bam, Krisy, Dagging, Maybel, Pam, You Girl, Thelma and Left Eye. Yet, it is these tragedies that allow for the transgender community to lean on each other and carve out spaces within Jamaican society where they can live in their true identity. As Hibiscus would say in her opening monologue of episode 2 of the series:

"But if you're looking for di lost, you come to di wrong place. An you stepping to di wrong girl. I doh lost, I did always know me"

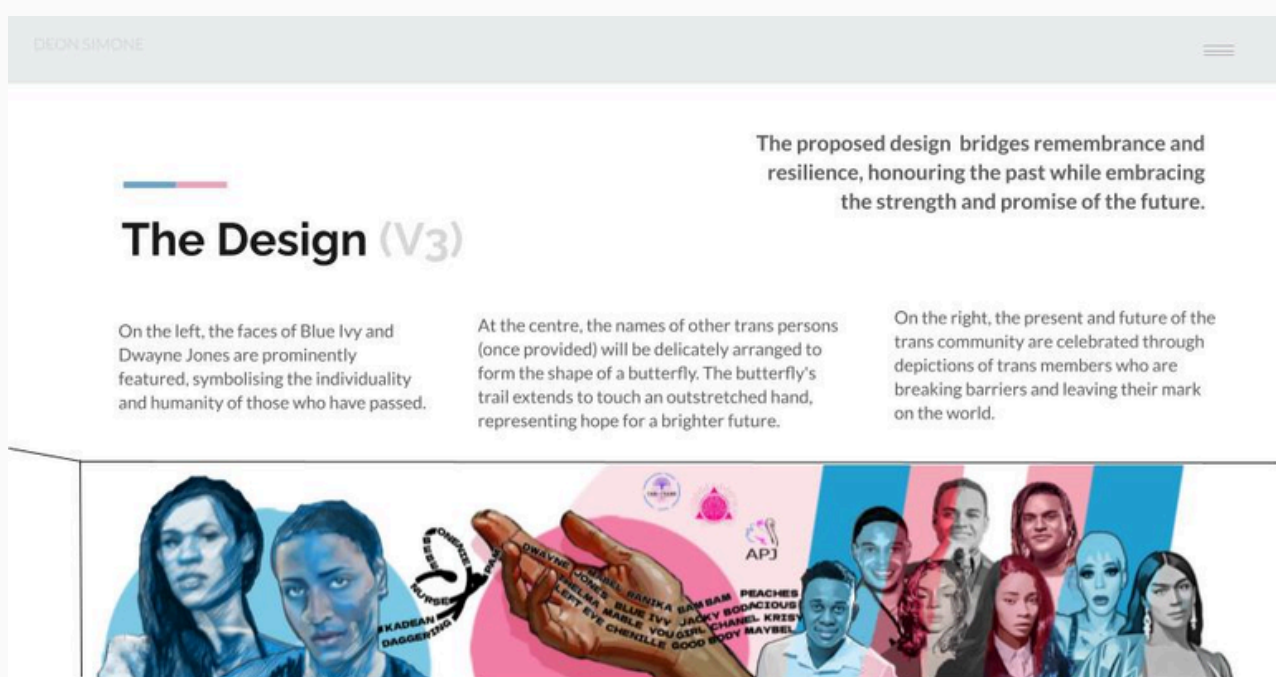


Image 11: TransWave's Trans History Mural MockUp designed by Deon Simone

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