

Urvashi Vaid, Pioneering L.G.B.T.Q. Activist, Is Dead at 63

Over a four-decade career, she profoundly shaped a range of progressive issues, including AIDS advocacy, prison reform and gay rights.



Urvashi Vaid in an undated photo. She placed herself at the center of a wide array of progressive issues, centered on but not limited to the L.G.B.T.Q. rights movement. Credit...Jurek Wajdowicz

By [Clay Risen](#)

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Urvashi Vaid, a lawyer and activist who was a leading figure in the fight for L.G.B.T.Q. equality for more than four decades, died on Saturday in Manhattan. She was 63.

Her sisters, Rachna Vaid and Jyotsna Vaid, said the cause was breast cancer.

From her days as a law student in Boston, Ms. Vaid was at the center of a wide array of progressive issues, centered on but not limited to the L.G.B.T.Q. rights movement. Long before the word “intersectionality” entered common parlance, she was practicing it, insisting that freedom for gay men and lesbians required fighting for gender, racial and economic equality as well.

“A purely single-issue organizing approach prevents us from making the connections that would advance our goals and would advance the project of building a progressive movement,” she told the magazine *The Progressive* in 1996.

At the height of the AIDS crisis, in the late 1980s and early '90s, she led the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (now the [National L.G.B.T.Q. Task Force](#)). That platform made her one of the most vocal and visible figures in the push for AIDS funding and against federally enshrined anti-L.G.B.T.Q. discrimination.

She was the rare activist who was as comfortable within the confines of pragmatic electoral politics as she was marching in the streets. She was ejected in 1990 from a speech on gay rights by President George Bush for holding a sign that read, “Talk Is Cheap, AIDS Funding Is Not.” But two years later she broke with other progressive activists to support Bill Clinton for president.



Ms. Vaid argued that the movement for L.G.B.T.Q. rights had erred by focusing on access to the mainstream, rather than on gaining power to change it. Credit...Jurek Wajdowicz

“She wasn’t a zealot,” the playwright Tony Kushner, a friend of Ms. Vaid, said in a phone interview. “She understood the perfect could not be the enemy of the good, and that progress was made in steps.”

But her fondness for President Clinton was short-lived. After he backtracked on his promise to end the military’s ban on openly gay service members and, later, signed the Defense of Marriage Act, which codified marriage as being between a man and a woman, she considered not voting for his re-election.

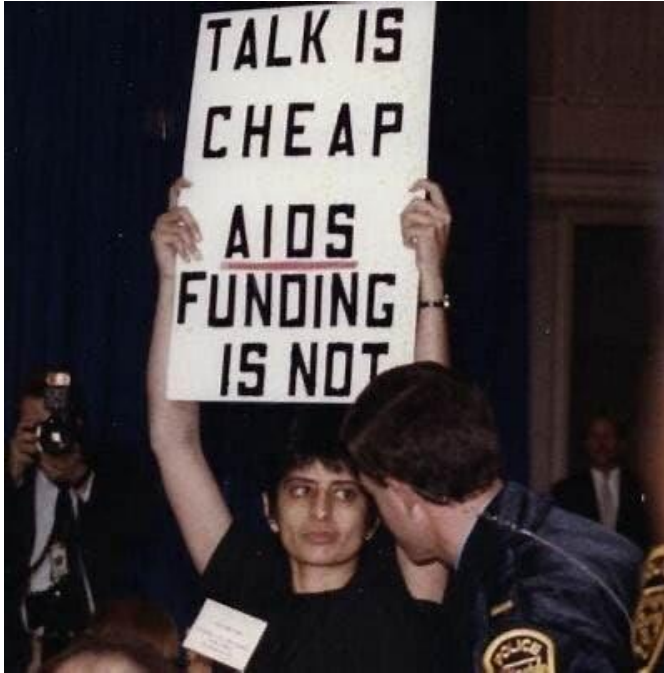
She ended up backing him, reluctantly, but she turned her disillusionment into a teachable moment for progressives. She left the task force in 1992 to write a book, “Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation” (1995).

Ms. Vaid argued, in that book and elsewhere, that the movement had erred by focusing on access to the mainstream, rather than on gaining power to change it. It wasn’t enough to be in the room with Mr. Clinton, she said; the movement had to be able to change his mind.

She also drew a distinction between L.G.B.T.Q. rights and L.G.B.T.Q. liberation. Pushing the mainstream to accept gay men and lesbians, she said, was a worthy first step, but one that risked forcing people to tailor their own identities to fit into straight society.

Liberation, on the other hand, meant altering the mainstream to accommodate a range of gender identities — a seemingly extreme position at the time, but one that accurately foreshadowed the rapid and broad changes now underway around established gender norms.

“She put the gay rights movement in a progressive context that no one else can lay claim to,” Rachel Maddow, the MSNBC anchor and a close friend of Ms. Vaid’s, said in a phone interview. “She really had a singular impact as an individual. She changed the AIDS movement, gay rights and the civil rights movement in ways directly attributable to her.”



Ms. Vaid was ejected for protesting at a 1990 speech on gay rights by President George Bush. Credit...National LGBTQ Task Force

Urvashi Vaid (pronounced UR-va-shee VAD) was born on Oct. 8, 1958, in New Delhi, India. When she was still a child, her father, the writer [Krishna Baldev Vaid](#), received an appointment to teach at the State University of New York at Potsdam, and Urvashi soon followed with her sisters and her mother, Champa (Bali) Vaid, a poet and painter.

All three Vaid sisters attended Vassar College, from which Urvashi graduated in 1979 with a degree in political science and English literature.

Along with her sisters, Ms. Vaid, who lived in Manhattan and died at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, is survived by her partner, the comedian [Kate Clinton](#). She is the aunt to [Alok Vaid-Menon](#), a gender-nonconforming performing artist.

Though Ms. Vaid said her earliest memories of political activism were of antiwar protests in the late 1960s, it was in college that she found her voice. She was especially drawn to liberation movements in the developing world, and she joined other students in pushing Vassar to divest from South Africa.

“My understanding of liberation did not come from the feminist and gay activists with whom I worked, but rather from movements working to end colonial occupation and white supremacy,” she wrote on the website OpenDemocracy in 2014. “The African National Congress, who defined themselves as ‘a national liberation movement,’ were my heroes.”

She attended law school at Northeastern University, continuing her activism on campus and in Boston. She and an alliance of gay and lesbian students persuaded the university

to add sexual identity to its nondiscrimination policy, and she worked off campus at Gay Community News, a weekly newspaper.

The paper served as a crucible for Ms. Vaid's political worldview: Staunchly progressive, it took on a wide swath of issues, including prisoner rights, feminism, antiracism and economic inequality. And it was among the first news outlets to publicize the growing prevalence of H.I.V. in the gay community, and to highlight the homophobia that was swelling around it.

"She was a revelation to me," said Sue Hyde, whom Ms. Vaid hired as an editor at Gay Community News and who, with Ms. Vaid, founded the L.G.B.T.Q. Task Force's annual Creating Change conference. "She was a revelation the way she thought, the way she organized, the way she envisioned a movement that really had never existed."

After graduating from law school in 1983, Ms. Vaid moved to Washington to work as a staff lawyer for the National Prison Project, an initiative by the American Civil Liberties Union that she helped expand to include advocacy for incarcerated people with H.I.V. and AIDS.

She became a spokeswoman for the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force in 1987 and its director in 1989.

She later worked at the Ford Foundation; served as executive director of the charitable Arcus Foundation; and led a research center at Columbia Law School before establishing her own nonprofit consulting firm. She also founded [LPAC](#), a political action committee that supports political candidates who, in its words, "share our commitment to L.G.B.T.Q. and women's equality, and social justice."

And she continued to organize, whether it was a national political campaign or a weekend march down Commercial Street in Provincetown, Mass., where she lived part time with Ms. Clinton.

"If I ever had a question, I'd call Urvashi and she could explain it," Billie Jean King, the tennis player and activist, said in a phone interview. "She knew every policy that was going on, on every issue."

In one of her last public appearances, to accept the Susan J. Hyde Award for "longevity in the movement" at the Creating Change conference in March, Ms. Vaid warned that the decades of progress she had experienced were now under threat.

"We are facing an existential threat to our existence," she said. "Our response must be strong, militant and much more aggressive than it has been thus far."