

IN MEMORIAM
Toni Hamilton and Kee Kee Sellers

The HIP Committee's current work with transgender prisoners was launched and inspired by two incredibly brave and determined trans women at Corcoran, Toni Hamilton and Kee Kee Sellers. This project continues in honor of their lives, and in solidarity with all transgender, intersex, and gender-variant prisoners who are forced to struggle in order to survive.

Toni Hamilton died of medical neglect at Corcoran on August 1, 2000. She fought to receive medical care against insurmountable odds – doctors who ignored the hepatitis C that was destroying her liver and nurses who blocked her access to necessary medication, calling her a “flamboyant homosexual” who did not deserve adequate medical care. Toni was an outspoken transgender woman who fought for hormone therapy and appropriate medical and mental health care for all transgender prisoners. She herself had been taking hormones for over 30 years before she was sent to Corcoran. When she arrived there from another prison, she sought to continue hormone therapy as part of her ongoing medical care. The Chief Medical Officer refused to prescribe the therapy, absurdly claiming that hormones would pose a security risk. She fought this in every way possible – filing internal grievances against the doctors and contacting outside advocates to bring attention to the discrimination she and others faced in prison. She also helped to organize others to jointly press for hormones as part of the standard of care for trans women inside.

Kee Kee Sellers was also a transgender prisoner at Corcoran. She was co-infected with HIV and hepatitis C and received very little monitoring or care for either virus. She had been on hormones for years on the outside, but did not trust Corcoran medical staff to manage her hormone therapy in addition to her HIV medication. Even as her health rapidly deteriorated, she continued to risk harassment and retaliation by proudly asserting her gender identity and compelling prison staff to treat her with respect. As she neared the end of her life, she made up her mind that she would absolutely not die in prison. At a time when no one from Corcoran was receiving compassionate release (and very few prisoners anywhere in California), Kee Kee decided that she would be the one to break that pattern. Despite the sorrow she felt at saying goodbye to her loving partner inside, she funneled every bit of energy she had toward making it out of Corcoran alive. At one point, she was in the prison hospital with virtually no t-cells, a large infected hole in her chest, on heavy pain medication, and hooked up to an oxygen tank, still thoroughly determined that she would live to see her release. In June 2000, after a long battle that included initial rejections, media blitzes, letters from legislators on her behalf, and a transfer to another prison, Kee Kee won her compassionate release. She even held on for a few more months, reuniting with her family and eating barbecue every day. She died on August 21, 2000.