

First Ever Transgender Cultural District Co-Founded By #XLBossLady Aria Sa'id

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The first time I saw Aria Sa'id she was speaking at Alley Cat Bookshop, a small book seller in San Francisco's Mission district. She was talking about what it was like dating, trying to find a job and falling in love as a young transgender woman of color in a big city. She immediately captured my attention with her honesty, vulnerability and whimsically feminine style. I wasn't surprised to see her pop up on my feed less than a year later announcing she was in a position of leadership for an ambitious project. Sa'id is the youngest of a trio of trans women who founded the world's first transgender cultural district in San Francisco's Tenderloin. I was interested in talking with Sa'id about being a young plus-size executive. Meet Aria:

Virgie Tovar: What do you do?

Aria Sa'id: I am a transgender advocate and award-winning political strategist. I am a founder and executive director of the world's first transgender district, The Compton's Transgender Cultural District. And in 2018, I founded an empowerment project for Black transgender women that is near and dear to my heart, Kween Culture Initiative.

Tovar: What is a cultural district and how does it serve people?

Sa'id: A cultural district is an area of a city that celebrates the history, culture, and presence of communities - particularly marginalized or minority communities. Many people are familiar with "Chinatown" or "Little Italy," and those are in fact cultural districts. Cultural districts support the creation of businesses and programs that serve the local community, and provide an experience for the rest of the city to support and boost that neighborhood's economy. I think we're in an era where gentrification seems to be taking place overnight, and cultural districts can work towards preventing displacement of communities who have lived in these neighborhoods for generations.

Tovar: Tell me about the first trans cultural district. What was the story of getting there?

Sa'id: We were fighting forecasted displacement of poor communities of color and transgender people. We were also working towards getting the city of San Francisco and real estate developers to acknowledge the really rich history of the Tenderloin, and how transgender people in the area have contributed greatly to society.

Many people don't realize that this area of the Tenderloin has had documented continuous presence of transgender people since the 1920s, and a culture that gained visibility at the Compton's Cafeteria Riots in 1966 - one of the first documented riots of transgender and queer people in United States history.

In our fight, we were able to gain legislation to protect the neighborhood's historical and cultural assets, and we're just getting started. My hope is to lead the district into cultivating as much transgender ownership as we can, and building communities and business models that support stabilizing the most vulnerable of our community. We want to lend access to economic opportunities, employment, income enhancement, housing, arts, culture and more. I think in particular the nonprofit industry has been focused on placing a band-aid on social problems. And the reality is that economic and social disparities aren't quite solved. I want to look towards models that are generating resources for transgender communities that benefit them directly - whether it's innovative job training for jobs people actually want, creating a pipeline towards business ownership or simply creating tool kits of knowledge on personal finance and sustainability. Black transgender women in particular don't have access to these resources or knowledge overall. I think it's pretty radical that we can work towards changing that reality.

The Compton's Transgender Cultural District's aim is to build spaces and programming that celebrate the presence of the local transgender community, the lives of transgender people overall, and the incredible legacy we have inherited both in San Francisco and around the world.

Tovar: Who's your boss crush & why?

Sa'id: I have two who I just adore! Both of them have given me so much inspiration and such a framework to follow as a leader, and they have led by example. I think because of that their leadership gave me the confidence I needed to be a leader.

Sheryl Evans Davis is the Executive Director of the San Francisco Human Rights Commission. Prior to leading the Transgender Cultural District, I worked on her team as the LGBT Policy Advisor. Seeing her in action and seeing her commitment to marginalized youth and her ability to lead in style, grace, and stilettos has been incredible. I learned so much from her on how Black women can lead efforts of impact, and also how difficult it is to be a vocal Black woman leader in spaces where we are consistently a minority.

My other boss crush is one who I have aspired to be like since I began my career over ten years ago. Joanne Keatley is a founder of the University of California, San Francisco's Center of Excellence for Transgender Health. She was a trailblazer during the 1990s when public health consistently disregarded the health equity of transgender people, and still referred to transgender women of color as "transvestites" and "cross dressers" in academic research. When she founded the effort, she had to fight for the humanity of transgender people to be seen and acknowledged. Since then she has created what is now the world's leading thought partner on transgender health. And when you interact with her, you would never know all of her accolades and accomplishments. She's super humble and so down to earth. It's because of her work that I believe I have the career trajectory that I have had, and she gave me such a framework of commitment to creating excellence for transgender people.

I have so much love for these leading ladies.

Tovar: What was a pivotal moment in your professional or personal development?

Sai'd: Learning to be my own cheerleader.

I think it's really easy to rely on outside affirmations to validate who you are as a person and who you are in the world. I, like so many women, struggled with low self-esteem. I also had to face living in a world where I received the message of, "you can't," every day. I am a plus size, brown-skinned, Black woman of transgender experience. The world on every level communicates to you that you can't or aren't deserving. It is through being my own cheerleader that I think I'm able to dare, dream and lead the work I do. Early in my career no one really believed in me or my work. I was a former sex worker, have no college degree, and I just had to cheer myself on until everyone else followed. You kind of have to start the slow clap and hope folks join along. Especially when you don't fit the mold.

Tovar: What makes a good boss?

Sa'id: I am on a learning curve with this because, as a boss, I straddle the fence between being a benevolent dictator and a wonderful collaborator. When I know my vision and communicate it to my team, I want everyone to be aligned with it. But I also want honesty, and I don't like yes-people. I think it's important that when you're a leader that you constantly consider critique and feedback. It keeps the work moving and it keeps it informed. And most importantly, it keeps it impactful. The best bosses are in harmony with their team. Knowing your team, and knowing the strengths and areas for growth for each individual is important. Being able to provide your team with work that challenges them keeps everyone motivated, dedicated and creative. The best bosses are also a part of the team, can get their hands dirty when they need to, and give praise and acknowledgment to the team members to keep morale high and keep team members enthusiastic. And finally, the best bosses lead by example.

Tovar: What advice do you have for the aspiring #XLBossLady?

Sa'id: Dress like it's the first date - every day.

I just turned 29 years old, and it's honestly been my new mantra. I have it written on a chalkboard in my house, and I think it's been forcing me to find spark everyday. It's forcing me to revamp the work uniform or wear the clothes I yearn to wear but that feel "too dressy." Or be more playful in my outfits instead of more stiff. Dressing like I'm going on the first date keeps me playful and adventurous. I kind of love challenging routine a little bit. Some days I fail because you know, decision fatigue. But I just see the mantra daily, and go right back to that goal. I'm noticing a huge difference. Digging deeper, I think it's encouraging me to show up for my own life first, and show up fabulous overall.