



Amanda
Greene

CASE STUDY

Fortifying Southern Movements

“

We need to engage the young people who fall through the cracks, who have to try extra hard just to be seen. Our young people have found their voices, and are proud of their voices, but often their stories are used against them.

Shaena Johnson,
BreakOUT! co-director

A lot of politicians and organizations talk about the need to prioritize the people most affected by injustice, but New Orleans-based BreakOUT! illustrates this value in action. Launched in 2011 by five, Black, queer and trans founding members, BreakOUT! has quickly grown to be a national leader in the struggle to end the criminalization of LGBTQ youth.

Louisiana is the prison capital of the world,¹ and although Black transwomen are disproportionately targeted by police and subjected to an appallingly transphobic prison environment, few women's rights and LGBTQI organizations focus their work on addressing the injustices of the criminal justice system. And few criminal justice organizations center the needs of women and LGBTQI people. Employing a visionary approach that combines healing with organizing, BreakOUT! transcends the limitations of single-issue tactics and works at the intersection of movements.

¹ http://www.nola.com/crime/index.ssf/2012/05/louisiana_is_the_worlds_prison.html



Led by its predominantly young, Black and Latinx, queer, trans, and gender nonconforming members, BreakOUT! builds the power of those with the deepest understanding of the unique needs and assets of these communities and leverages that power to develop solutions to inspire lasting change.

While still in its infancy, BreakOUT! succeeded in getting language prohibiting police profiling on the basis of gender included in a New Orleans Police Department consent decree. Then in 2014, it published groundbreaking research about policing in New Orleans that was conducted by and for queer and trans youth of color — aptly titled We Deserve Better — which it delivered to the Office of Mayor Mitchell Landrieu. Hearing from its members affected by homelessness about their mistreatment in the only shelter serving youth in New Orleans, BreakOUT! worked with the shelter to develop its first LGBTQ-affirming policy and conduct a training for staff.

Recently, BreakOUT! has been a strong voice in elevating the conversation about the increasing and alarming levels of violence that trans people of color face and the need for media accountability in respectfully covering these tragic incidents. Following the murder of Penny Proud — a 21-year-old, Black, trans woman in New Orleans — BreakOUT! led a public awareness campaign that included erecting a billboard in a heavily trafficked part of the city, organizing the first-ever trans march in New Orleans led by trans youth of color, and lobbying City Council Members to implement Policy 402 and prevent discriminatory policing and allocate additional funding for housing, job opportunities, and educational opportunities for queer and trans youth in New Orleans.

While its work starts at home in New Orleans, BreakOUT! collaborates with regional and national groups that advance racial justice, immigrant rights, and queer liberation across the US Southeast and nationwide. At the same time, it continually invests in the individual and collective development of its member-leaders by offering education support, leadership development, and organizing training. BreakOUT!'s holistic, grassroots approach is so rare — and so necessary — that national organizations often turn to it for guidance when developing their own



strategies. Co-director Shaena Johnson has spoken at the White House LGBT/HIV Criminal Justice Briefing, participated in the White House National Convening on Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion, and currently sits on the Federal Advisory Committee on Juvenile Justice, where she is the only person representing a Southern or local organization.

Since its founding, BreakOUT! has expanded in every way: it moved into a larger office, hired more staff, grew its membership, and increased its influence and reach. A key to its success has been being deliberate about ensuring growth is sustainable and community-based. BreakOUT! does that by following the lead of its members and keeping a pace that allows it to effectively balance the needs of its members and the organization.



ADVANCING OUR MISSION

BreakOUT! occupies a rare and important position in the social justice landscape: it is Southern-led, locally based, and centers the needs of queer and trans youth of color. Since 2013, we have provided BreakOUT! with general operating and travel support that contributes to its ability to work intentionally and expansively to address the immediate needs of its multifaceted community while igniting long-term, structural change in New Orleans, the US Southeast, and nationally. BreakOUT! knows what its community needs and has a solid approach to movement building and advocacy, so we provide ongoing, core support through our US Southeast grantmaking and capacity building support through our communications strategy — then we simply get out of the way.



For more information or to sign up for our newsletter, please visit fjs.org.