

February 16, 2021

Dear Chair Prozanski, Vice-Chair Thatcher, and members of committee,

My name is Dana Spears, my pronouns are she/hers, and I'm testifying in support of SB 704, which would ban LGBTQ panic defenses here in Oregon.

As the sister of Aja Raquell Rhone-Spears, a Black trans woman who was murdered last year, I cannot stress the importance of this bill enough.

Aja was a glamorous, 34-year-old transgender woman. The youngest of 10 children, she was a favorite aunt amongst her nieces and nephews. And it's easy to see why: she was cool, stylish, adventurous, and was an entrepreneur, earning her the nickname "International Barbie." But you could also find her close to home, working with our siblings to help out our father who had returned home after 21 years away and needed our support and care.

It's obvious that family meant everything to Aja. She would have us over to her apartment all decked out because she wanted it to be special. Because she wanted to show us we were special.

But on July 28, everything changed. Aja had spent the day with her niece Blueberry before planning to go to a vigil for a friend who had recently passed. Blueberry asked Aja to skip the vigil so they could continue their time together, but Aja felt compelled to support her friend. So she told Blueberry "I'm going to attend this event, and then I'll come back to pick you up."

But she never returned.

Instead, we started receiving phone calls that no one ever thinks they will receive. Community members were calling to say that Aja had been murdered.

I was in shock. I thought they had to be wrong, that someone had taken Aja's ID and it was all a horrible mistake. It couldn't be Aja.

But at the scene, my worst fears were confirmed. Aja had died from multiple stab wounds.

And, to add insult to injury, the police proceeded to misgender and deadname Aja, meaning they referred to her as the gender and name assigned to her at birth. This is a painfully disrespectful act.

The police also claimed they had suspects in custody, yet hours later, the suspects were boasting about Aja's death on social media. To this day, they haven't been charged.

I'm here today because justice for Aja cannot wait. Her voice cannot go silent. I used to say "All muscle, no voice," and she would say "But sister, I can't use my voice!" So today, for Aja, I say "All muscle, all voice."

I'm asking you all to use your legislative muscle and your voice for Aja. For all Black trans women. Because when we finally see justice for her murder, we want to ensure that we can show up to the courtroom and her memory is not insulted by someone trying to use the panic defense for her death.

Please, show up for the safety of the LGBTQ community and pass SB 704.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

-Dana Spears  
Portland, OR