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The Passionate Life of Charlotte Bunch

A documentary sheds light on an unsung hero in the movements for LGBT and women's rights.

By **Allison Steinberg**

On the dawn of what may be the next activist Age of Aquarius, it's important to look back at the roots of our movement to pay tribute to those who sowed the seeds. Charlotte Bunch is one such cultivator, and a new documentary expertly illuminates how the lifelong feminist activist has employed an ethos of passionate politics as her *raison d'être*, pouring her heart and soul into helping to carve equal pathways for women and LGBT people.

You don't have to look far to get insight into the imprint that Bunch has made on our collective history and the groundwork she's laid for shaping our future. Filmmaker Tami Gold's visual résumé of Bunch's many touchstones, *Passionate Politics: The Life and Work of Charlotte Bunch*, the subject's activism is skillfully interwoven with the very human story of her coming-to-be as central player in the movements that shaped the world in which we live today. The new hour-long documentary traverses the five decades of seemingly tireless efforts by Bunch as she globe-treks to educate and empower women and LGBT people.

"The local and global are always different dimensions of the same struggle," Bunch says in the film. "I try to change the conditions that are affecting our lives." Gold's film follows Bunch as she visits a women's shelter in Peru; attends a protest following the murder of a butch lesbian in South Africa who was stoned to death just steps from her home; and goes to the United Nations to lobby leaders to protect these minority groups on an international level. The film reveals Bunch's intimate involvement with the genesis of the feminist and LGBT rights movements and her equally present savvy all around the world.

Bunch was the first female fellow at the Institute for Policy Studies, a Washington, D.C., think tank. When she wasn't taken seriously at Washington roundtables because of her gender, she made what would be the first of many bold moves in her lifetime and started the first official women's think tank. In arguably the second boldest move of Bunch's life, she left her husband for one Rita Mae Brown (you may know her as the author of the quintessential lesbian novel *Rubyfruit Jungle* or the woman who also nudged Martina Navratilova out of the closet) and thus began her life as a lesbian — an identity that would continue to guide and inspire her work.

The lifelong activist spoke at the very first National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights in 1979 and has since organized conferences all over the globe, professionalizing and mobilizing local women and LGBT people across South America, Africa, and Asia to end discrimination and inequalities. Bunch's accolades are numerous: She accepted the White House Eleanor Roosevelt Award from Hillary Clinton; was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize; was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame; and was named founding director and senior scholar at the Center for Women's Global Leadership at Rutgers University.

Passionate Politics was a natural fit for filmmaker, educator, and activist Tami Gold when the project landed in her lap following the death of her close friend and fellow filmmaker Joyce Warshow.

"Joyce was always concerned that the lives of older lesbian activists were hidden from view, and she was determined to challenge and change this," Gold says. "One of the last requests Joyce made was for me to take her vision and make it into a film."

Gold has more than carried out her friend's mission, recently completing the film and getting it placed in a growing list of festivals and venues including the Athena Film Festival, the Portland Queer Documentary Film Festival, the Global Peace Film Festival, the New York MIX Queer Experimental Film Festival, and the Roosevelt House Public Policy Institute, among others.

While Gold's work often tells the stories of significant social issues through the lens of inimitable individuals, her work on *Passionate Politics* proved an educational experience for her. "In the process of making the film, I learned about the power of being quiet and about thinking before doing. I was reminded that the 'personal is political' and that the 'political is personal.' Most importantly, I was introduced to the potential power of the global women's movement and that women really do hold up half the sky."

Gold's film is most extraordinary not in its portrayal of Bunch's work but in its subtle vignettes of Bunch as a human being. "Who's not tired?" Bunch asks wearily, as she reclines in the backseat of a car following one of the innumerable engagements that consume her life. "They say I'm tireless. That doesn't mean you quit."

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