So one of my favorite things when it comes to dating is holding hands. That moment where you aren’t sure if he’s going to interlace his fingers or if he’s going to pull away. Should I leave my hand “available” for him to grab, or should I be more direct and just go for his hand so he knows that I’m interested? These were the questions that would race through my head on a date as I first get to know a guy and begin to feel those butterflies in my stomach. Today, I have the privilege of freely walking down the streets of NYC hand in hand with my boyfriend as we head to a show or to meet up with friends, (while now due to COVID-19 that is not quite the case) but it is never far from my mind that this was not always the case in NYC, and is still not the case in many parts of the world.

My ability to do that freely was made possible by many people, but one name can never be forgotten, Marsha P. Johnson, “the mayor of Christopher Street”. Born Malcolm Michaels Jr. on August 24, 1945, in Elizabeth, New Jersey, to a family who was active in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Marsha, as many young queer individuals, Johnson suffered from bullying for their self-expression and Johnson’s own mother described “being homosexual is like being ‘lower than a dog’.” This kind of upbringing created a world for Johnson where “the idea of being gay was ‘some sort of dream’ rather than something that seemed possible.” Ultimately the pursuit of this dream was put on hold for Johnson until moving to New York City at 17.

Marsha is known for many reasons and when questioned about gender, Johnson would refer to the “P.” initial in their name saying “pay it no mind.” Johnson was a gay liberation activist and self-identified drag queen, and an outspoken advocate for gay rights. Many interviewed about the Stonewall uprising of 1969 speak to Johnson being a key player, along with Zazu Nova and Jackie Hormona, in the response to the police at the uprising. On top of all of this, Johnson was known as a founding member of Gay Liberation Front, co-founder of the gay and transvestite advocacy organization S.T.A.R., and an AIDS activist with ACT UP.

It is impossible to be living in our world today where black lives are being taken from us on a daily basis because of police brutality, and protests rising up in the streets screaming for their voices to be heard when racist beliefs and ideologies still want to keep them silent, and not think of how Marsha was fighting this fight over 50 years ago. That in order for me to have the freedom to wave a rainbow flag or walk freely in the city with my boyfriend only to stop on a street corner where he pulls me in to give me a kiss without fear of being stopped by the police, comes from people like Marsha P. Johnson who fought back in a moment of extreme prejudice toward the black and LGBTQ+ community. A series of riots is what began the journey to the freedoms and rights I have today to one day marry the man I love or to start a family if we want. I will never forget the courage it took for Marsha to live a life authentically the way they were meant to be in a time where our society wasn’t welcoming of anyone who didn’t represent the status quo. For Marsha, being gay was just “some sort of dream,” but for me that dream is very much a reality, and I will forever be thankful for the LGBTQ+ heroes who made that possible. I want to acknowledge how thankful I am for the life of Marsha P. Johnson as a black trans trailblazer who fought for the freedoms that I get to carry with me everyday. freely holding the hand of the man I love.