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They've Walked Through Fire to be Themselves: How Volunteers Can Help LGBTQ Youth

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They've Walked Through Fire to be Themselves: How Volunteers Can Help LGBTQ Youth

Cover Page Footnote

We would like to take a moment to thank the following people who have inspired us to do better in advocating for LGBTQ youth as we embark upon our careers in secondary education as newly licensed teachers: Dr. J. Ruth Dawley-Carr, whose mentorship and guidance spans far beyond encouraging and assisting us in writing out our experiences for this journal. Mr. David Biele and the hardworking staff at The Center on Halsted, for all that they do for LGBTQ youth. The youth at the Center, who allowed us to spend time with them and opened themselves up to us. Use your voices – they matter just as much as anyone else's, and can make just as big an impact.

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Introduction

LGBTQ youth today face bullying and sexual-identity based rejection that lead to homelessness. Often experiencing trauma in their homes or in the foster care system, LGBTQ youth require services that are rarely available in the traditional shelter and transitional housing system. Ill-trained service providers either unaware of the special circumstances surrounding this population or who themselves perpetuate the trauma through their own prejudices or misconceptions can further traumatize this youth population and a lack of funding to maintain even the most basic services so desperately needed by homeless LGBTQ youth further exacerbates the inequalities LGBTQ youth face. No young person in the nation should be harmed for their gender identity or sexuality, and as a nation we can certainly do better.

As part of a service-learning assignment in our teacher preparation program, as well as before and after the assignment was completed, the authors volunteered with the Youth Services Program at the Center on Halsted in Chicago, so as to engage with, provide meals to, and learn from LGBTQ youth who face homelessness and housing instability. As newly licensed teachers in History/Social Studies, our commitment to the education and safety of youth, social justice, and engaging students in civics enabled us to meet two goals we had as volunteers. The first goal was to deliver an important service: to lend an ear, create positive relationships, and provide a hot meal to the LGBTQ youth who visited the center. The second goal was to absorb as much information as possible - to educate ourselves on the challenges faced by LGBTQ homeless youth, their needs, and where the system is failing them - so as to apply this knowledge to our practices as educators who have dedicated our lives to being advocates for all our students.

This article provides a brief review of literature that describes how LGBTQ youth are disproportionately impacted by homelessness and related challenges when compared to cisgender youth. We also reflect on our experiences serving LGBTQ youth at the Center and our interviews with the Youth Services Program coordinator, David Biele. We end with an invitation for you to support LGBTQ youth in your community.

Literature Review: The Problem

LGBTQ youth are more likely to be kicked out of their homes because of their sexual orientation or gender identification (Prock et ano.; Rhoades, Rusow, Bond, Lanteigne, Fulginiti, & Goldbach, 2018). Indeed, approximately 20%-40% of homeless youth are sexual minority youth despite being only 5%-8% of the general population (Robinson, 2018). After being rejected from their family of origin, these youth are often forced to navigate hostile situations within the foster and shelter system.

Transgender and non-gender conforming youth are especially vulnerable to violence and discrimination at home, in foster care, and shelters, as well as on the streets (Robinson, 2018). As Robinson (2018) noted gender segregation and even segregation of youth simply because they are gay or lesbian in shelters stigmatizes and further isolates these individuals. Often, LGBTQ runaway homeless youth (RHY) face mistreatment at the hands of shelter staff and foster families, causing these youth, in a continued search for safety and security, to run away from the very institutions in which their security was charged.

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Without trained, culturally competent agency staff who can administer LGBTQ-affirming interventions and services, LGBTQ RHY will at best receive inadequate care and at worst, avoid seeking needed services altogether. This, in turn, may perpetuate or exacerbate the risks these youth already face, such as school drop-out, mental illness, substance use problems, violence and victimization, and incarceration. However, RHY who have utilized LGBTQ-specific services show “positive outcomes, including higher academic achievement, lower substance use, and greater mental health” (Fish, Moody, Grossman, & Russell, 2019, p. 2419). As such, it is imperative the aforementioned needs are met, services are provided, and gaps in training are addressed.

Wagaman (2016) explains that “LGBTQ youth have unique experiences that require programs and services attentive to the impact of discrimination and oppression on their long-term health and well-being” (p. 403). These services, compiled by Maccio & Ferguson (2016), include: housing services, both emergency crisis beds as well as permanent supportive living programs; educational services inclusive of GED, college preparation and career education; access to housing and dining during school breaks; employment services from planning services to job development, as well as training for addressing discrimination in the workplace; family services; LGBTQ-affirming services from cultural to health (both physical and mental); cultural competency training for shelter staff and non-LGBTQ individuals utilizing shelter services; and advocacy and organizing, specifically with regards to rural communities.

Three suggestions for organizations that serve LGBTQ youth include (1) better understanding LGBTQ youth and how they are living, (2) better customize the services they offer, and (3) partnering with the community and enhancing communication Wagaman (2016). As individuals volunteering for the Youth Services Program at the Center on Halsted, we were engaged in a variation of Wagaman’s suggestions for organizations. Namely, we were driven by a desire to better understand the LGBTQ youth and their needs through communication. As newly licensed teachers, we especially wanted to get a better understanding of what LGBTQ youth need from an adult who is there to serve them. We wished to explore ways in which we could help empower them to meet the challenges they face on the streets.

Our Experiences

The Center on Halsted provides an array of services for the LGBTQ community from behavioral health and counseling services, to HIV testing, to community and cultural events, to holistic services, as well as running the Town Hall Apartments adjacent to the Center which houses LGBTQ seniors. One of the programs offered by the Center is the Youth Services Program run by David Biele, Director of Youth Services.

We spoke at length with Mr. Biele about the issues facing his clients, 60% of whom are homeless or who are experiencing housing insecurity. He informed us that 95% of the Youth Program’s clients are youth of color between the ages of 13-25. To cover the cost of his three-person staff and provide programming for these youth, the Center relies heavily on grants specifically targeted for LGBTQ youth, as well as private donations.

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Mr. Biele's experience with this vulnerable population confirmed what previous studies have observed:

LGBTQ youth are at a higher risk for many mental health issues. They are, in terms of suicidality, substance use and abuse, at a greater risk for homelessness than their straight counterparts. Despite advances made in our society over the past fifty years—Stonewall, marriage equality, etc., nationwide, significant numbers of LGBTQ youth experience bullying because of LGBTQ identity. They don't feel safe in their schools.

The youth program seeks to fill in the gaps other youth services cannot offer this unique demographic. In addition to regular programming four days a week, The Youth Center offers a safe space where LGBTQ young people can build community. It provides hygiene products and free haircuts, and maintains a food pantry and a clothing closet where their clients can feel safe finding clothing that expresses their identity.

As part of the daily programming, volunteers prepare a meal for the youth. We volunteered on Tuesday evenings over the course of one semester. As a cisgender straight white woman and a cisgender white gay man, we approached volunteering from different perspectives. Randy already had experience volunteering at the Center in this same position. In addition, he had volunteered at an emergency center with The Ali Forney Center in New York City. He noted that volunteering at Ali Forney was very much the same as it is with The Center on Halsted: cook a meal and spend time socializing with the youth.

I (Randy) recalled the apprehension I felt as I went for my first shift at Ali Forney. I kept thinking about what the volunteer supervisor had said to me when I asked him what I, a middle aged, middle class white guy, could possibly offer these young people. His response has stuck with me throughout my entire volunteer career. He reminded me that many of the homeless young people I would encounter had been rejected by their families. That the men in their own families had very often beat them, humiliated them, and done everything in their power to tear them down. He then reminded me that when these youth finally found themselves on the streets, they often reverted to survival sex just to get by. My role, he explained, was to just be there for them without wanting to hurt them or wanting to use them. I was to be an example of an adult who could be their friend.

Mr. Biele noted during one of our conversations that “gay youth, even today, even though there is a lot more representation ...do not have role models.” That has been Randy's primary goal in volunteering with LGBTQ youth, not just to be present, but to see them and listen to what they have to say. Sometimes all they need is someone to hear what they did that day. Even though there are much more positive role models today than when I was growing up in the mid-1980s, I think it's probably in many ways harder for these kids when they hear politicians and television pundits regularly debating their very identity. It must be incredibly frustrating and frightening when adults and other people in those positions say such awful things. These kids don't yet have the mental skills to help them cope with what they hear. They must feel like they don't have a voice. That no one is hearing them. I want to hear them.”

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From the perspective of Youla, who is not a member of the LGBTQ community, the central focus of volunteering by cooking at the Center was just that - to hear the students. Savior complexes so often turn opportunities for volunteering into opportunities for boosting someone's own resume, reputation, or their own idea of themselves, without truly doing the work required to understand and learn from the people they are trying to serve and identify ways to interrupt the causes for homelessness at their roots. I was particularly concerned with making sure that the focus was on the youth and their stories. My goal was to prepare and serve a hot, nutritious meal to youths who needed it. I didn't want to make it about me. I was there to cook and interact with the young people there. Those interactions fell under two categories. one involved pleasantries and small talk while serving their meals and the other constituted listening to them explain things about their lives or their interests. I won't lie; some of the content of conversations went over my head. I chose to nod and smile, despite this, not wishing to subject them to having to explain themselves in the space in which they fully and wholly belonged, without having to explain anything. Instead of questions, I chose to focus my own conversational capital with the kids by bringing kindness into the space. Of course, every interaction we have with other human beings is an opportunity for learning and personal growth. I am eternally grateful to the staff and youth at the Center on Halsted for the many lessons they taught me, and the insights into some of the struggles and emotions my future LGBTQ students may be dealing with, which I hope to make good use of by continuing to educate myself on how to be an ally to all students, and an advocate for justice.

Once you get into the space and push past your reservations, things change quickly. Randy was once told it often takes the youth three or four encounters with you before they start to trust you and open up. While this wasn't usually how he found it to be, there were many clients at both Ali Forney and at The Center who viewed him with suspicion at first. But once they realized he wasn't there to hurt them, they were eager to let him in. In fact, there were often times when clients shared things with him, he suspected, for shock value. He recalled one client at Ali Forney who always showed up to eat with the group without a shirt. During one dinnertime conversation the youth informed him he liked to blend in, to not stand out. Randy couldn't help but laugh and told the young man that anyone who showed up to a group dinner shirtless was decidedly not looking to blend in. The youth agreed and the whole table had a good laugh. For the most part, volunteers are there to offer that kind of rapport and support, giving them a venue to express how they feel about themselves and helping them with basic social skills.

Another youth engaged Randy in conversation one evening as he prepared a meal of spaghetti and salad. This young man had been living on the streets for a number of years and told Randy he'd just started a new job waiting tables and was excited to finally be getting a subsidized apartment. The youth then went on to tell him that before he got the waiter job, he used to be a gogo dancer at a gay club in Manhattan. Suddenly, his tone switched as he announced very firmly that he "wasn't a piece of meat." He must have said it five times: "I'm not a piece of meat, you know." Clearly, his experiences on the street (likely as a hustler) and as a gogo dancer had had a strong impact on his self-esteem and self-worth. All Randy could say to him was "I know." "I understand." "You have a lot to offer."

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Most of the youth who utilize the services at the Center on Halsted experience homelessness because their gender or sexual identities. They were rejected by their families for being gay or transgender. At the Center, they are free to be themselves and, moreover, to express themselves in ways they may not be able to do in other places. One Tuesday, Randy's parents joined him to cook dinner. It happened to be just before the alternative prom organized by the Center. Macy's had donated four or five racks full of clothes for the youth to wear and most of the clients were excitedly trying on ball gowns and feathery hats and high heels. Randy's mother had connected with a very masculine looking young man with a full beard and was helping him try on dresses. He'd prance around the Youth Center as he explored how the clothes felt on his body. Randy's midwestern father, always trying to understand the dynamics of sexual orientation and gender identity, looked at him and said, "So, he's transgender?" To which Randy replied, "No, dad, he's just a fabulous gay guy." His father shook his head and, laughing, said "I'm never gonna get it."

That's the beauty of working as a volunteer in a place like the Center among these unique individuals. They can always teach you something. We don't always get it either, whether it's not understanding something about youth culture today or about the LGBTQ community in general, but we do know that we take these young people at face value and accept them for who they say they are. They've walked through fire to be themselves. Many of them prefer to be on the streets than with families who don't accept them. One young client once told us that his family in Evanston was quite wealthy, but he preferred to come to the Center for free meals rather than conform to what his family wanted him to be and compromise who he is.

Conclusion: Get Involved!

While our work at the Center was mostly in the capacity of cook and mentor, it was clear there was much work being done around us that was pushing an already thinly stretched staff to the limits. We asked Mr. Biele where volunteers are most needed at the Center. He mused that Covid-19 has hit non-profits hard and his staff has been reduced, thereby forcing The Youth Center to rely much more on volunteers. In addition to making the weeknight meals as we did at the Center, volunteers are also needed to design and implement workshops, offer administrative support, help organize and run special events, such as the summer BBQ on the beach. One of the new programs Mr. Biele hopes to soon implement is a substance harm reduction program. He expects this program will need to rely heavily on volunteer support to maintain and run it.

Given the unique needs of LGBTQ youth, the already anemic funding available for them, and now with the unprecedented effects of Covid-19, this vulnerable population is more than ever in need of help. As Mr. Biele so clearly outlined, volunteers are now more than ever vital in helping to keep these young people safe. As a wise professor of ours once informed us: It doesn't serve your students to pity them. This certainly rings true when considering the complicated population of LGBTQ youth.

Our duty, then, as a community is to continue to work towards empowering our LGBTQ youth, creating a future of greater inclusivity and less discrimination. While LGBTQ-affirming centers such as the Center on Halsted are making strides towards empowering LGBTQ youth by providing sorely needed counseling, housing, medical, and mental health services, as well as education on their civil rights, we as a community must expand these safe spaces into the rest of

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the world. Through civic engagement, LGBTQ youth can learn the true power they wield when they are able to vote for their local, state, and national representatives, particularly at the local level, which most significantly and directly impact their lives. And through a better understanding of the power of their individual voices, which combine to form a collective demand for equality, LGBTQ youth can become activists and advocates for themselves and promote true change. The heterosexual/cisgender community must hear this call to action, to educate themselves on the injustices faced by LGBTQ people, and to do the work as allies to lift them up and amplify their voices. LGBTQ youth are smart. LGBTQ youth are resilient. LGBTQ youth have tremendous potential.

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