

Who Will Feed Our People? North Tulsa's councilors hunting for a dragon to slay. Page 17

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Home Again**

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# Sometimes You Can't Go Home Again

Homelessness among homosexual and transgendered teens is a problem under the radar for most

By Holly Wall

**Y**ou're going to burn in hell." More likely than not, someone who is openly gay and living in Tulsa has heard these words, if not spoken directly to him or her, then at least as a generalization used by a condemning observer to describe his or her peers.

In the very worst cases, a young person has heard these words spoken directly to him from the mouth of a parent.

Michael heard these words twice in his life between the ages of 12 and 18, once spoken by his mother and once by his father. At 12 years old, he knew he was very different from his peers, but he couldn't find the words to describe the difference he was feeling. While the other boys his age were attracted to girls, he found himself attracted to other boys.

In an effort to put a name to what he was feeling, Michael went online and searched "homosexuality." When his mother caught him unexpectedly, they were both equally shocked, and it was then that his mother blurted out those painful words.

Although society has made great strides in the last 20 to 30 years in being more open and understanding to those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning, there is still a stigma associated with LGBT issues that makes it difficult for those people to be open and honest about their sexual orientation. For youth and teens coming to grips with their sexuality, especially those raised in devoutly religious homes, the trauma of coming out can be magnified by their parents' rejection of them based on their sexuality. Oftentimes youth coming out in hostile environments will be disowned by their parents, kicked out of their houses, abused or neglected.

Though Michael was one of the "lucky" ones—his parents didn't kick him out of their home and they were never physically abusive, but, thinking their son could very possibly be gay, they never treated him with the same love and understanding that they did before his sexuality became an issue—many children in Tulsa are forced onto the streets after coming out to their parents.

Because the phenomenon of LGBT youth homelessness is such a rampant one, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute and the Nation Coalition for the Homeless released "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth: An Epidemic of Homelessness" in 2006. The report is an analysis of the reason so many LGBT youth are left homeless and addresses problems that affect them and the federal government's response to this issue.

The almost 200-page document also features chapters written by the heads of model organizations established throughout various metropolitan areas aimed at combating the epidemic.

While the number of homeless persons living in any given area is nearly impossible to calculate,

mostly due to nomadic lifestyles and a lack of accurate census reporting methods, the number of homeless youth who are also LGBT can be nearly impossible to quantify. By analyzing the available research on this topic, The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services estimates that the number of homeless and runaway youth ranges from 570,000 to 1.6 million per year.

Based on this research, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force estimates that between 20 and 40 percent of all homeless youth identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. That figure, compared to the widely believed notion that only three to five percent of the U.S. population identifies as LGBT, is astounding.

The reasons for LGBT youth becoming homeless usually begin with family conflict, most often after the young person has made the decision to come out of the closet, or reveal to his family members that he is gay.

One study, the report noted, said that 50 percent of gay teens experienced a negative reaction from their parents when they came out and 26 percent were kicked out of their homes. Another study reported that more than a third of LGBT youth who are homeless or in state custody experienced a violent physical assault when they came out, which made them feel safer on the streets than in their own homes.

Some LGBT youth who aren't forced by their parents to leave their homes choose to do so because they anticipate verbal, physical or sexual abuse, neglect, mistreatment and other negative responses from their revelation of sexuality.

Youth Services of Tulsa, 311 S. Madison, runs an adolescent emergency shelter that is LGBT friendly and offers runaways and "throwaways" ages 12 to 18 a short-term place to live at no cost, usually for about 30 days. The shelter offers a warm bed, food, clothing, access to education (there is a classroom onsite, and if the young person is a student at Tulsa Public Schools, shelter staff will see to it he or she gets to and from school), counseling and access to other services.

Youth staying at the shelter are referred by the Tulsa Police Department, schools and other agencies and they also come on their own.

The 20-bed shelter accommodates between 14 and 17 kids on a regular basis. Lately, there have been up to 19 sleeping there on any given night.

Jim Walker, executive director of YST, said most youth who are involved in family conflict only stay a week or so before they are reunited with their parents or find another family member or friend to stay with. For those in the state's custody, though, living in foster or group homes, the stay can sometimes surpass 30 days while the young person's case worker tries to find him or her an appropriate place to stay.

It can be more difficult to place LGBT youth who are out about their sexuality because of discrimination by foster parents and youth and staff members at state-run foster facilities.



Some of the homeless youth seeking services from YST may be placed in the agency's Transitional Living Program, which serves young women ages 16 to 21 and men 18 to 21 with developing the skills they need to live on their own while providing a safe, stable place for them to get on their feet and providing an opportunity to develop the necessary personal, social, educational and occupational skills to live on their own.

The program accepts only those young people who demonstrate the ability and desire to benefit from the program, and, even then, not all those who will benefit from it will experience it because of obvious lack of space issues. However, these programs, as well as the LGBT support group sponsored by YST, serve to provide support to LGBT and straight youth.

YST established its LGBT support group 16 years ago.

"It was a pretty radical step for the agency to take at that point," said Walker, "and it was agreed that it would be a very low-key program. This came from some of the kids in the group saying, 'If you advertise this a lot, I won't be able to come.'"

"Youth Services became involved in this issue because it was identified as a gap in service in our community, and a group of young people who were extremely vulnerable, so it fit our criteria. It was something, at the time, that no one else was doing," said Walker.

The group remains small, at six to 12 kids per meeting, and provides a safe, non-judgmental arena to discuss issues relevant to their experiences as LGBT youth.

YST also offers homeless teens, straight and LGBT affiliated, a drop-in center twice a week where they can shower, do laundry, eat a hot meal and receive blankets, coats, clothes and food. While the program begins simply to provide non-judgmental support of these youth, Walker said YST counselors have begun to work to convince these kids to get off the streets.

Ken Draper, founder and director, and Tim Gillean, board president of Openarms Youth

Project, 2015 S. Lakewood, believe there is still a gap in service offered to LGBT youth, especially those at risk, and they hope that sometime in the near future, their organization can help fill this gap by offering short-term transitional living to LGBT youth and those over 18.

"There's a huge gap after 18," said Gillean. "Nobody provides services after 18. You're considered to be an adult, you should be self-sustaining at that point, and if your parents toss you out, that's it. You're at the adult shelter (Salvation Army and Day Center for the Homeless, for example). You're literally on your own. And (adult shelters) are not safe places for any youth."

"So 18 can be a very difficult age, and there's a gap there in services we really hope to be able to fill more efficiently in the future."

As of now, Openarms offers youth between the ages of 14 and 21 support groups, referrals for counseling, case management and a safe place to socialize. And it has been doing so for the past 12 years.

Draper worked with various LGBT youth groups in the past, and, until 2001, Openarms, then called Openarms Youth Group, was providing Draper employment. When the group's funding fell through, instead of allowing it to dissolve, he and the kids decided to keep it going on their own.

Since then, the group has been very successful in offering LGBT youth a safe, welcoming place to get help and have fun. The support group meets on Thursdays, and Draper and Gillean provide the kids with a hot, usually home-cooked meal beforehand. On Saturday nights, somewhere between 200 and 250 kids head to Openarms to socialize. There is usually a talent show, a DJ, games and other activities. Openarms provides security, and the event is drug and alcohol free.

On Wednesdays, before Gay Movie Night, Openarms hosts a coming out support group for kids who are planning to come out or just thinking about the possibility. On its Website, [www.openarmsproject.org](http://www.openarmsproject.org), Draper and Gillean offer advice about coming out beginning with



PHOTO BY LISA NEWMAN

lives and an important part of us, no matter how devout we are or claim to be. And, since most major religions denounce homosexuality as a sin, one that a person commits by choice and not because it is innately who they are, this area of the U.S. can be very unwelcoming to LGBT folks, even when those people may be family members, friends or neighbors.

Nancy McDonald, president of the Tulsa chapter of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) said her daughter came out in 1986 at the age of 18. Though she always knew she felt differently than others growing up, it wasn't until she was 18 and left home to attend college in Boston that she finally found the words to describe what she was feeling.

"My daughter is 40 now, and when you talk to her now, she says she knew she was different probably in emerging adolescence, but she didn't have the words for it. Today, kids have the words because it's on TV and it's in the media. It's talked about," said McDonald.

McDonald said she, too, suspected something was troubling her daughter but never knew how to go about initiating a conversation with her. When her daughter finally came out, she began an adamant

search for information about the topic.

She came across an article about PFLAG and found that the nearest chapter at that time was in Colorado. There were none in Oklahoma, Texas, Missouri, New Mexico or Kansas.

"I thought, 'My God, I'm the only parent here with a child who's gay,'" said McDonald. "So even as a parent, you felt really disconnected and isolated."

The president of the Denver chapter, Eleanor Lewallen, flew to Oklahoma to help McDonald start the local chapter in March of 1987, the 20<sup>th</sup> ever established in the United States.

"Now there are something like 580 (PFLAG chapters in the U.S.). So, you can see, we were really on the cutting edge of all this."

Originally, PFLAG was made up of anonymous members. They didn't use their names, but connected with what was then called Oklahomans for Human Rights, did some advertising and developed a strong chapter. Now, McDonald estimates that it has 125 members and has served between 3,200 and 3,500 families.

PFLAG offers support to families and friends of lesbians and gays, as well as to LGBT people themselves, through education, support groups, the local helpline and advocacy.

From the moment her daughter admitted she was gay, McDonald knew that she sexuality was only a small part of who she was. It didn't change the way she felt about her daughter, but it did make her want to learn more about LGBT issues so she could be a supportive advocate, both for her daughter and for the LGBT community at large.

As a president of the national PFLAG organization for two years, McDonald testified on behalf of pro-LGBT legislation in Washington DC many times. It was through her travels and experiences on Capitol Hill that she learned about the problem of LGBT youth becoming homeless, either kicked out or running away after coming out to their parents.

"I've always taken the position that, when a child comes out to you, (he or she) is really giving you the gift of honesty, a value you taught (him or her). And then when (he is) being honest, to reject (him), is really difficult for the child," said McDonald.

And it's for that reason that she and other LGBT advocates will tell children who are preparing to come out of the closet to make an assessment of the possible consequences of their actions. McDonald said that if a young person is in high school and believes he will be forced to leave his home after coming out, or is in college and believes her parents could pull her financial stability out from under her, she often advises her to wait until she is self-sustaining, working and living on his own, before coming out.

And that approach is largely agreed upon by most who spoke with *UTW*.

"I think, in a lot of ways, we are more divided now around LGBT issues as a country than we have been in the past," said Justice Waidner, executive director of Oklahomans for Equality (OkEq), the LGBT advocacy group and community center, newly relocated to 621 E. 4<sup>th</sup> St.

"I think, in the past, it was more about education, but I think most people now are aware of LGBT issues, and I think people, from our experience, have very clear, very definitive opinions as to whether to support LGBT people or not.



PHOTO BY LISA NEWMAN

Another study reported that more than a third of LGBT youth who are homeless or in state custody experienced a violent physical assault when they came out, which made them feel safer on the streets than in their own homes. Pictured: Jim Walker of Youth Services of Tulsa.

One study, the report noted, said that 50 percent of gay teens experienced a negative reaction from their parents when they came out and 26 percent were kicked out of their homes. Pictured: Mana Tahaie of OkEq.

"Remember once you are out there really is no turning back so be sure you are ready."

Gillean said religious and social conservatism, especially in this area of the country, is one of the major barriers to youth coming out or having a positive experience once they do come out.

"We see the religion thing so much," said Gillean. "You'll see parents who have never gone to church a day in their lives, and if the child says 'I'm gay' or 'lesbian,' all of a sudden, they know Bible scriptures and that kid is the devil or going against God's will. And we see that here because we are saturated with it."

In Tulsa, as in other areas across the U.S., LGBT youth are very prevalent, most likely because of the role religion plays in local society. For many of those living in Tulsa and other areas of this region, which we locally attached call the "buckle" of the Bible Belt (though other cities offer up the same claim to fame), religion is a defining characteristic of who we are.

It is something we have grown up with all of our

"So when I think of young people making the decision to come out in our community, I think the most important thing for them to ascertain is if they do have support.

"And if they do have support systems in place, that can make all the difference for their coming out experience. If they know they're in a hostile environment, I think it is very important for young people to think about how coming out will impact their lives.

"But I would never encourage somebody to stay in the closet if it's impacting their mental health, impacting the quality of their life and the way they live their life, without having done a lot of reflection. In a lot of cases, young people have chosen not to come out until they've left home, and I think that decision is wholly with them," Waidner said.

But, many young people do choose to come out under their parents' roof because, as Waidner pointed out, denying what they intrinsically feel inside themselves can have significant psychological impacts. They face the threat of possibly being kicked out of their homes because, for them, living

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on the streets is more desirable than living a lie would be.

For this reason, because this problem persists, Waidner and OkEq Programs and Development Coordinator Mana Tahaie both agree that an important answer in combating LGBT youth homelessness and alleviating the problem is education. It's important, they said, to educate parents and family members about what their LGBT son or daughter is experiencing, and equally as important to educate agencies and individuals who are in the position to provide these young people with assistance, such as shelters, counselors, food pantries and other service centers.

"One of the most important needs in our community is educating the professionals who will be in the position to work with homeless youth, anyone from the police, to social workers, to judges, to churches, all of our institutions in a place to provide support to LGBT youth who are homeless that affirms them—or at least respects who they are," said Waidner.

"It takes an entire village, it takes an entire community to ensure that people, in whatever service they're being offered, that all are provided in a way that is respectful of the identities of everyone they serve," she added.

LGBT homeless youth face very specific issues on the streets. One 2002 study from the University of Washington found that youth who are LGBT are physically or sexually victimized, on average, by seven more people than non-LGBT homeless youth, Waidner pointed out. For those reasons, many youth go back into the closet once they're on the streets to avoid this victimization.

"The phenomenon of having to go back into the closet once you're on the streets... forces people to act against what their sexuality or gender identity is in order to just get by," said Tahaie. "It's terribly traumatic for young people to come out and then



"We see the religion thing so much," said Tim Gillean, left. "You'll see parents who have never gone to church a day in their lives, and if the child says 'I'm gay' or 'lesbian,' all of a sudden, they know Bible scriptures and that kid is the devil or going against God's will. And we see that here because we are saturated with it." Ken Draper is right.

are gender specific, transgender youth are forced to choose between their biological gender and what they feel intuitively, emotionally, to be a part of themselves. And that can lead to a bevy of other mental disorders.

And because religion still plays a major role in the reason so many LGBT youth are forced out of their homes, OkEq runs a support group called "Faith in Crisis," to deal with issues of sexual orientation and gender identity and religion. Right now, most of the group's attendees are LGBT, but it is also open to friends and family members who "have this experience where a loved one of theirs is coming out and they're saying, 'I love you, but everything in my life tells me I shouldn't,'" according to Tahaie.

Openarms offers similar religious counseling for young people.

"We let kids know they don't need to be anti-religion. I believe everyone needs some sort of faith in something," said Gillean. "I'm not saying what that format should be, but I'm a true believer you have to know your spirituality and your inner self to be a successful human. But we're the first to say, you don't have to take abuse from religion." **UTW**

