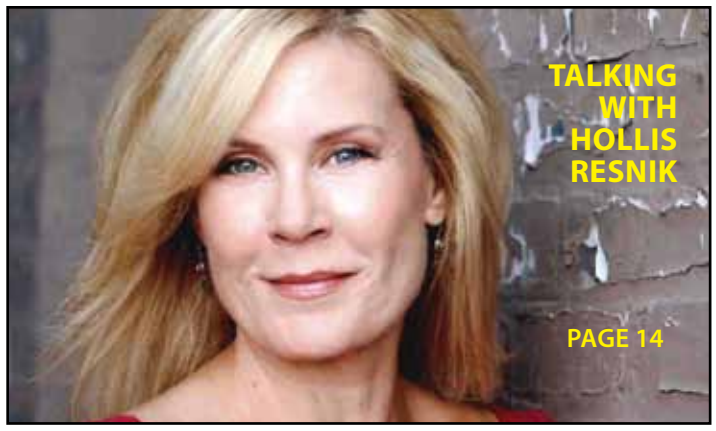

WINDY CITY TIMES

THE VOICE OF CHICAGO'S GAY, LESBIAN, BI AND TRANS COMMUNITY SINCE 1985

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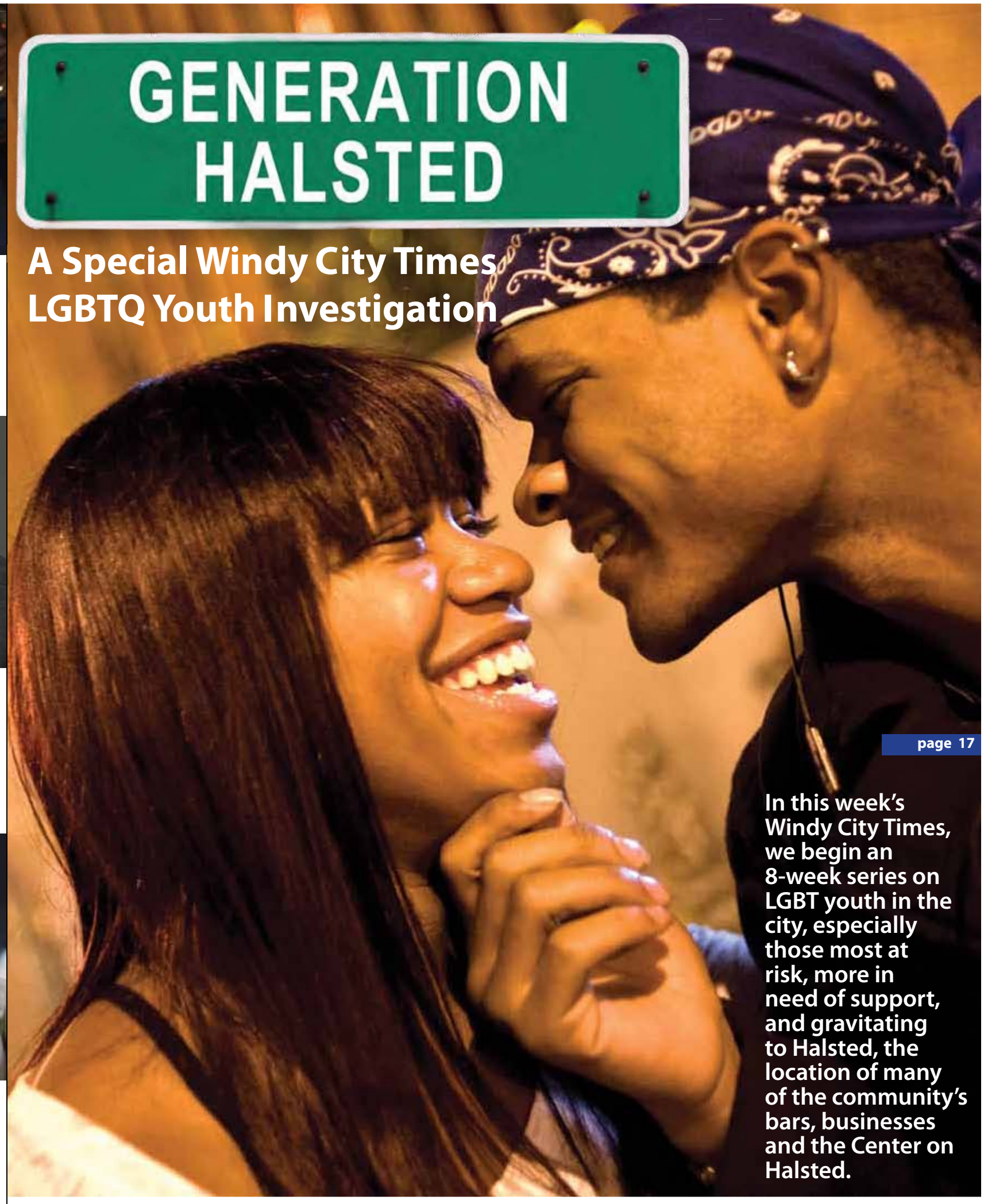

A Special Windy City Times LGBTQ Youth Investigation

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In this week's Windy City Times, we begin an 8-week series on LGBT youth in the city, especially those most at risk, more in need of support, and gravitating to Halsted, the location of many of the community's bars, businesses and the Center on Halsted.

Two young people share a private moment outside the Crib, the Night Ministry's LGBT-friendly shelter. Photo by Bill Healy.

LGBTQ Youth Series from WINDY CITY TIMES

Koala, 18, walks along North Halsted Street on a chilly October night. Photo by Bill Healy.

Our Future, Our Selves

BY TRACY BAIM

The 1970s and 1980s. Chicago. Along the streets of heavily gay areas, especially the Near North Side, homeless youth gather, some hustling for money and food, others just seeking a reprieve from unwelcoming communities. Some are run-aways from violent homes, others have been kicked out after they came out as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender.

The mainstream society and its social safety net fails them, and police often harass them. But gay organizations try to help them, launching youth groups, giving them food and support.

Flash forward three decades. Along Halsted, especially near the shining new Center on Halsted, homeless youth gather, some hustling, some just wanting a safe place to gather. And while some adults want to help them, others within the LGBT community just want them to go away. The youth are stereotyped and harassed by authorities, including LGBTs.

What has changed since the 1969 Stonewall rebellion in New York, since the incredible Chicago LGBT activism of those early post-Stonewall years? Perhaps because LGBTs are now more powerful, there is a wider gap between the gay "haves" and "have-nots" than ever before. The business owners along Halsted are emotionally and financially far removed from the desperate situation faced by some of the newer LGBTs living on the streets, or couch surfing their way to stable and productive lives.

The undercurrent of both race and class differences between the youth, who are predominantly youth of color, and the powerful, who are predominantly white, is threatening to tear apart the delicate fabric of our LGBT community.

In recent years, the youth on Halsted have been blamed for an increase in crime, despite statistics that show they are more likely to be victims of crime and police harassment. Yes, some of them engage in illegal behavior, often as a survival mechanism. Some use illegal substances to cope with the stress of being kicked out by their families.

Windy City Times wanted to look beyond the sensational headlines, the battles between property and business owners and these young people, and find out more about the struggles they are facing.

In the next few weeks, Windy City Times will present a multimedia (print, online, audio and video) series of stories on LGBT youth in Chicago, particularly focused on those who are most at-risk and vulnerable, many of them living on the edge, wondering just what "community" means when it comes to their own LGBT lives.

Middle-aged LGBTs often lament about the way our community used to really come together more, especially when fighting common enemies—for gay civil rights, against AIDS, and more. There are still important issues we can rally around, but to do so may take us out of our comfort zones. It may mean crossing barriers between class, gender, race and more, to serve and help people who are facing some of the same obstacles our community has faced for many decades.

These youth are not one-dimensional. They are not all good or evil, saints or villains. They help one another survive. They have formed a community that others would admire, if they took the time to look beneath the surface of their looks, what they are wearing, or their challenges.

These are the bullied youth we don't often read about. They may not have the white young male face of Matthew Shepard. They may look different than you. But they need your help just the same. We talk about making a more gay-friendly world for the next generation, yet they are sleeping in the streets in large numbers. They are similar to any teenager or young adult you might meet, but they have more struggles in part because they are LGBT.

What do they think? What are their needs? In the next few weeks, we will explore our community from the perspective of these at-risk youth—those under age 25, many of them still teenagers—finding out what they think about the LGBT community.

It is part of our role in creating a better community to step out, step further to expand our definitions of who fits inside our community's permeable walls. If our community can't help the next generation—these kids who are our kids in the biggest sense of that word—then we are a community who has lost our way.

Generation Halsted: An Overview

BY KATE SOSIN

They sleep on streets built by the gay generation before them.

Chicago's queer homeless youth have come to Boystown—designated by city officials as the world's first official gay neighborhood in 1998—for everything from a hot meal to the promise of a life without homophobia.

Many have been kicked out of their homes for being LGBTQ. Others fled abusive households. Some simply have complicated life situations that led them to the streets (deceased or incarcerated parents, family poverty, the lack of support system, etc.).

The result is a community of queer youth sleeping on streets that, for many, symbolize the growing prosperity of Chicago's LGBT community.

In August, Windy City Times sent a team of reporters into these streets to document the lives and thoughts of these young people. Reporters Bill Healy, Erica Demarest and I documented the young people's experiences through photo, video, audio, survey and text for three months. Contributing reporters also included Will Hartman, Hayden Hinch, Bob Tekavec and Steve Liss, whose portfolio includes 43 covers for Time Magazine.

Over the next eight weeks, readers will get to know many of Lakeview's street-based queer and allied youth. The series will explore how the youth survive, what happens overnight in Boystown, where queer street-based youth congregate beyond Lakeview, the dynamics between youth and police, and how social service providers interact with young people.

This multimedia series will run both in print and online, so those accustomed to reading Windy City Times solely online or in print are encouraged to check out both.

Youth by the numbers

More than 100 young people participated in this series.

For the purpose of the series, Windy City Times defined "youth" as young people ages 24 and under, the same definition used by many local service providers. Still, some street-based young people interviewed were older than 24. The series did not exclude those 25 and older whose challenges and support systems matched those of their younger peers.

Most of those interviewed took an anonymous survey, the results of which follow this introduction. Others consented to on-record interviews, and their stories will be included in weeks to come.

Reporters conducted the surveys on the streets in Lakeview and in other areas where queer youth tend to congregate, including Auburn Gresham. Windy City Times and youth service providers also distributed the survey online and shared it through Facebook and Twitter.

Many young people served by Chicago agencies have come to expect monetary incentives for their participation in everything from HIV tests to social service programs. Windy City Times did not offer incentives to youth for this project with the exception of those youth surveyed in Auburn Gresham—an area known for sex work, where participation without incentives would have been unlikely, according to service workers. In this instance, reporters offered $10 Walgreens gift cards.

Reporters took great care to keep surveys anonymous and to inform young people about the ramifications of participating in on-record interviews. Those depicted in this series consented to being portrayed.

Overarching themes

Overwhelmingly, Windy City Times found that the youth who frequent Lakeview services are homeless or without stable housing. Many who are not homeless report difficulty at home that causes them to avoid returning for days at a time. Others have stable housing and/or family support but frequent the neighborhood to be with friends.

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GENERATION HALSTED

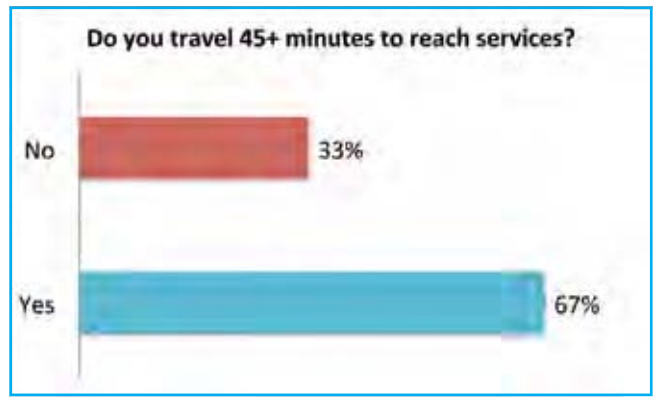
LGBTQ Youth Series from WINDY CITY TIMES

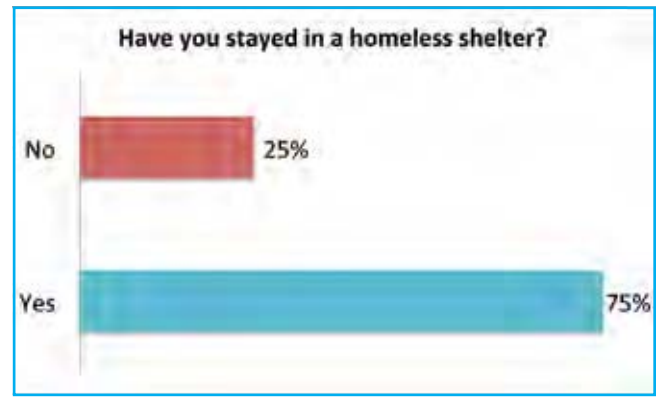
INFOGRAPHICS

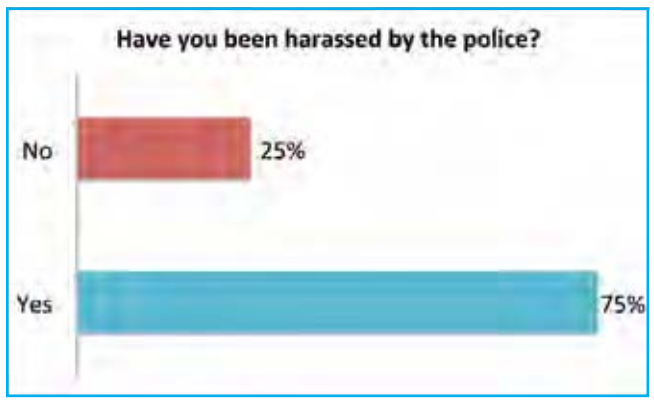
GRAPHICS BY ERICA DEMAREST

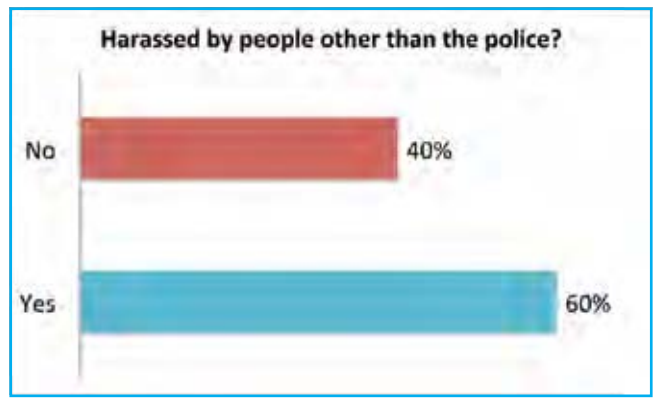
The Youth Experience

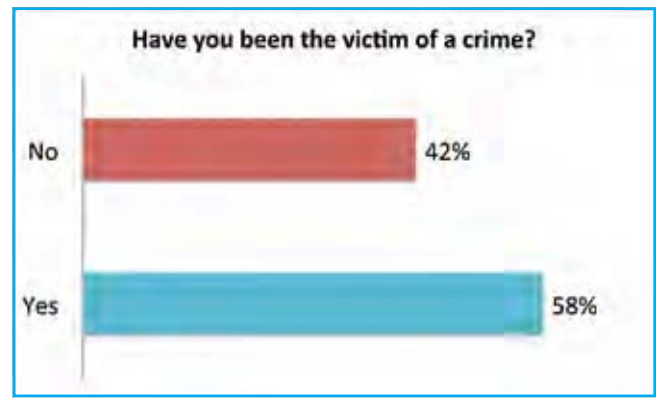
Survey participants (LGBT and allied youth aged 17-28) answered questions about their day-to-day lives.









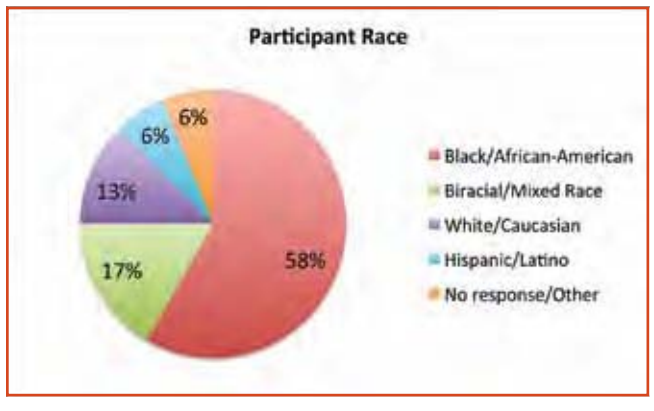


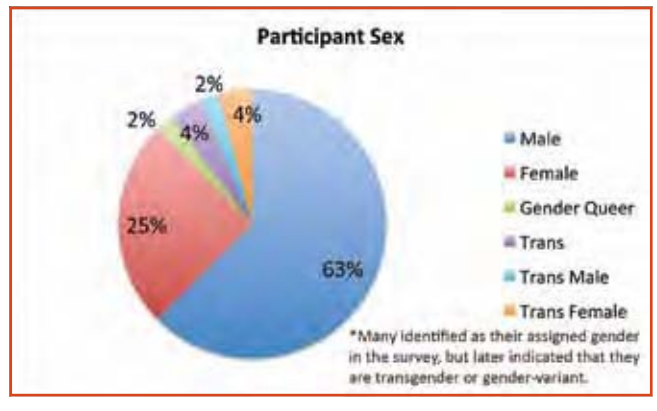
A young person enjoys spaghetti at Chicagoland Community Church's Sunday dinner program. For many LGBTQ homeless youth, the dinner is often the only meal they have over the weekend. Photo by Will Hartman.

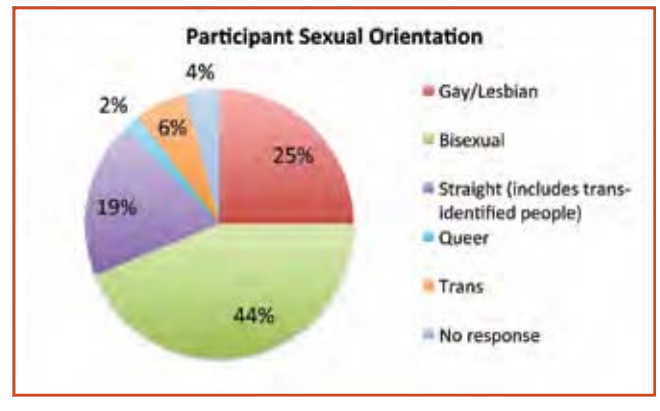
A young person in Lakeview takes a drag off a cigarette. Photo by Bill Healy.

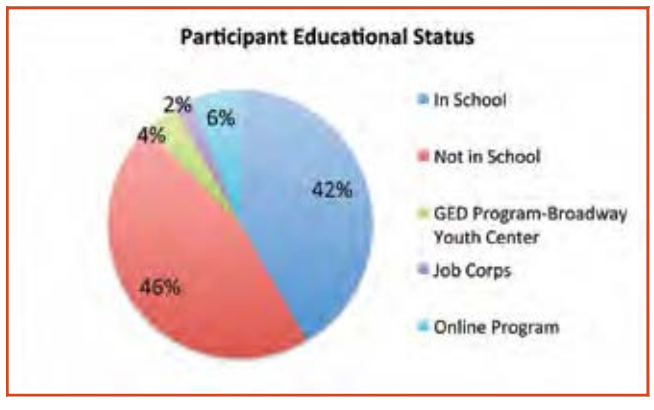
Survey Demographics

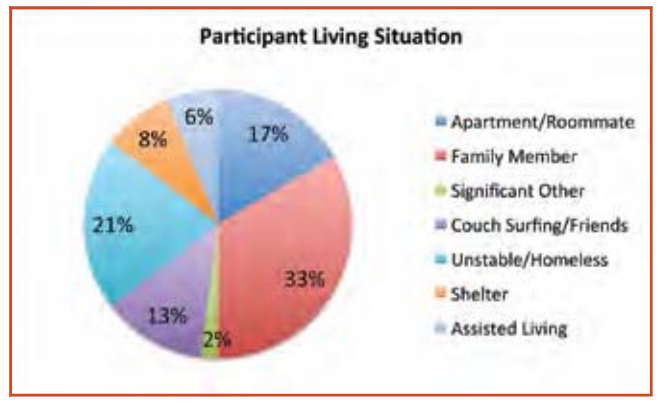
Survey participants (LGBT and allied youth aged 17-28) self-identified in each open-ended category. The median age was 21.











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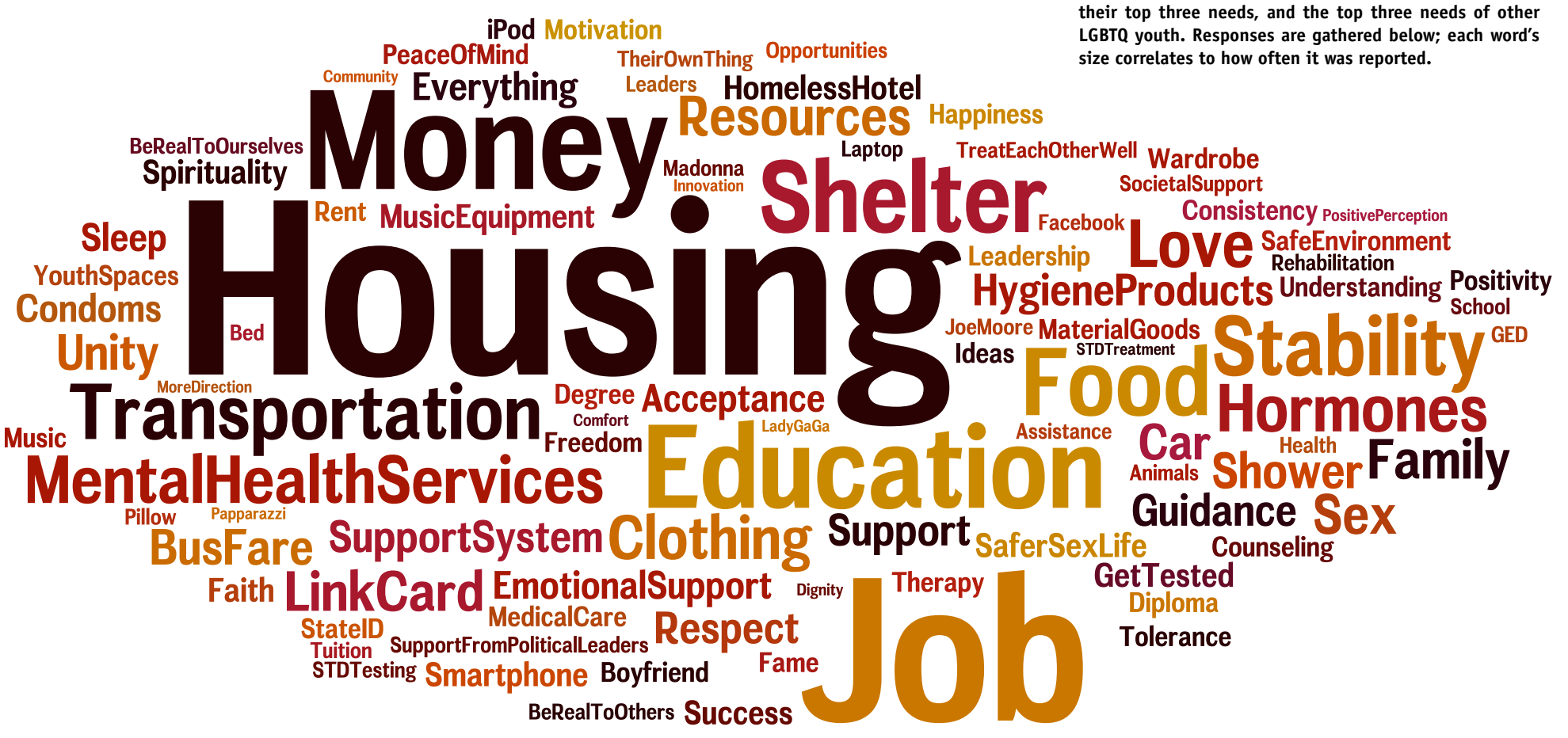
LGBTQ Youth Series from WINDY CITY TIMES

"What are your top three needs?"

Windy City Times asked survey participants to identify their top three needs, and the top three needs of other LGBTQ youth. Responses are gathered below; each word's size correlates to how often it was reported.



A group of young people pass a security guard outside Center on Halsted. Young people tend to gather and smoke outside the Center but are often asked to move away from the building or not block the sidewalk. Photo by Erica Demarest.

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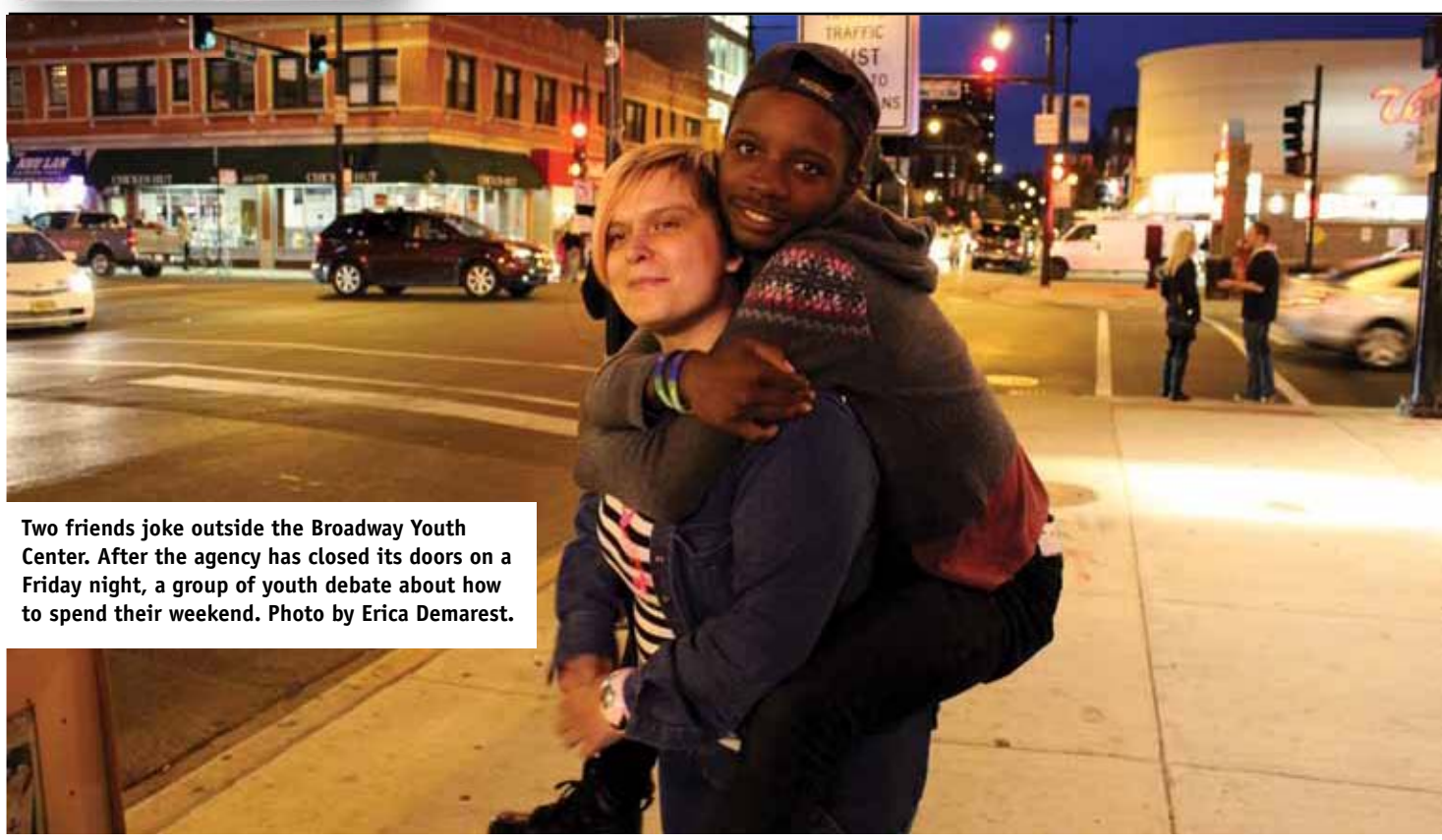


Two friends joke outside the Broadway Youth Center. After the agency has closed its doors on a Friday night, a group of youth debate about how to spend their weekend. Photo by Erica Demarest.

A young person sits outside a Chipotle restaurant at Broadway and Belmont. The restaurant sits next to Howard Brown Health Center's Broadway Youth Center, which offers drop-in services and other programs for youth. Photo by Erica Demarest.

Priest, 20, greets residents and visitors as they pass him by on Halsted Street. Many are headed to neighborhood bars and restaurants. Photo by Bill Healy.

next week in

GENERATION HALSTED

Meet the youth of Generation Halsted. We will feature several profiles and you will learn what day-to-day life is like for street-based youth.

for more GENERATION HALSTED look for WindyCityTimes on

YouTube vimeo

www.youtube.com/windycitytimes
www.vimeo.com/windycitytimes

or click the "YOUTH" tab at www.WindyCityMediaGroup.com

OVERVIEW from page 17

"[My mother] is not supportive of me being gay," said one participant, an 18-year-old Black male who lives at home. "It's like hard. It's like hell. It's like you're a chicken, and you live in a house full of dogs."

More than half of the youth who were homeless reported that they had been kicked out by their families for being LGBTQ. Many more said they left by choice due to physical, emotional and/or sexual abuse. Of those who had housing, many said they had slept in a shelter at some point.

While many youth praised the Crib, the Night Ministry's LGBT-friendly facility, shelter anecdotes were overwhelmingly negative. Respondents reported homophobic attitudes, dirty facilities and altercations with other residents, including rape and theft.

Nearly all of the youth self-identified as "bisexual." A handful identified as "gay." Almost none called themselves "transgender," even though many who were interviewed appeared to be gender-variant or use different names/pronouns than those assigned at birth. Several identified as "straight" but used LGBTQ services, or closely associated with LGBTQ youth. Some who identified as straight said they had dated or engaged in sexual activity with someone of the same assigned gender (for example, some young men identified as straight and added that they dated transgender women).

Survey Breakdown

The youth surveyed expressed a strong understanding of safe sex practices and sexually transmitted infections. Most reported that they regularly get tested for HIV, and many participants pulled condoms out of pockets and purses when asked about protection.

"I always wrap it up," said one gender-variant youth. "And I go get tested regularly just to be sure because there's nothing like knowing you're healthy and everybody is well taken care of."

Of social service providers in the city, youth most frequently reported using Broadway Youth Center and Night Ministry services.

Nearly all had also been to Center on Halsted, but of that group, a stunningly high number reported that they had been banned from the Center. Most who had been banned in the past said they believed they were still banned. As a result, many of the youth who had used the Center's services chose not to list the Center as resource for them. (The series will explore this issue further, with comments from Center on Halsted).

About two-thirds of respondents said they travel 45 minutes or more by bus or train to reach health and social service agencies. Some see the downtime as an opportunity to relax.

"It's the most peace I get all day," said one 25-year-old female.

Most described the lengthy commutes as restrictive, exhausting and irritating, citing incidents of theft and assault.

Young people also reported high levels of police harassment, with nearly all referencing an incident during which they felt they were unfairly detained or targeted by police. A number also claimed that a police officer had ignored them when they asked for help. Nearly all who reported police harassment said they felt police harassment in Lakeview exceeded that found in other neighborhoods they frequented.

"I'll get harassed just for being in front of my friend's house [in Lakeview] because his neighbors have problems," said one respondent, 21, who identified as Latino and male. "It's just really weird. And it really does happen to me a lot more on this side of town than it does on the South Side."

Some youth reported that they felt harassed by Lakeview residents or other people in the neighborhood.

"Some of the people that live in this area… if they see me and my friends, like they would just look at us, and they would say something under their breath and just keep walking," said one young person. "Then when we say, 'Excuse me, did you say something?' They'll just keep walking like nothing happened."

Asked what their needs were, a majority of youth prioritized a job/career as well as housing and transportation. Several also said they felt they needed mental health services or "peace of mind."

Most of the youth interviewed had not completed high school, but several reported obtaining General Education Development (GED) certification through Broadway Youth Center. Many also reported current enrollment in college, but in some instances young people intimated that this reflected their intention or desire to begin classes, not necessarily their current circumstances.

Survey Limitations

The surveys are not scientific, and Windy City Times makes no claims of scientific accuracy. Rather, the information presented aims to shed light on common themes among youth not typically captured in studies.

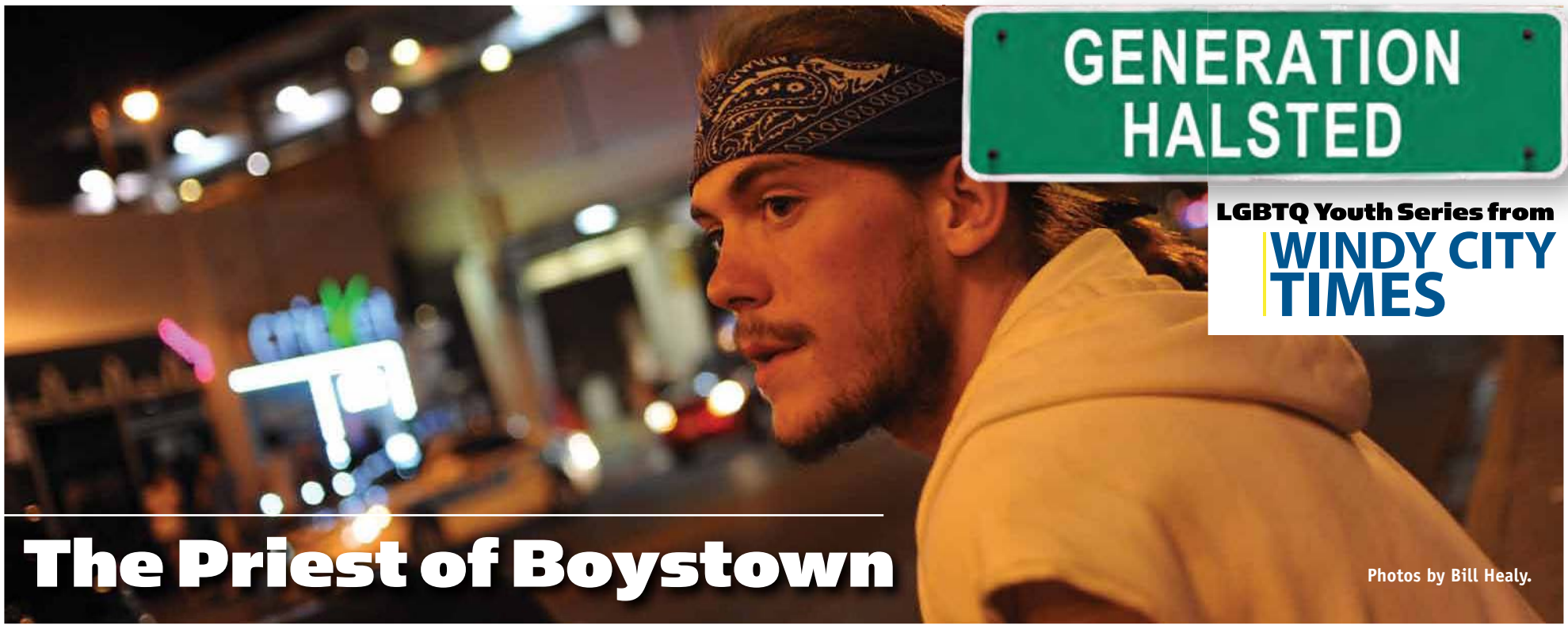
None of the questions on the survey were strictly multiple choice, leading youth to give a variety of responses to every question.

While respondents were overwhelmingly youth of color, white reporters conducted the majority of surveys. A common perception that reporters could be police or simply would not relate inevitably impacted some of the responses and discouraged some from taking the survey. Several young people declined based on negative past experiences with members of the press; still others refused for fear of perceived repercussions.

As a result, about 50 youth were willing to participate in the anonymous survey. This sample size is too small to extrapolate statistics or trends.

Finally, the surveys do not capture some of the more important aspects of queer youth street life, which will be explored in-depth over the next eight weeks.

Most significantly, many queer street-based youth care for each other in ways largely unseen in LGBTQ communities since the AIDS crisis. It is not uncommon for youth to forgo meals to feed each other, prioritizing those most in need in the moment over their own comfort.



LGBTQ Youth Series from WINDY CITY TIMES

The Priest of Boystown

Photos by Bill Healy.

BY KATE SOSIN

Priest greets everyone he passes on Halsted. He nods and gives a gruff "hello." Some look surprised or excited to be acknowledged. Others keep walking.

Priest, 20, has been on and off the streets since he was 15. These days, it's the streets of Lakeview, and he's bracing for his first Chicago winter.

As autumn creeps into the neighborhood, he starts to shiver. He pulls his arms deeper into the sleeves of his sweater. He needs some warmer clothes, he says.

Priest was emancipated from his family in St. Augustine, Florida five years ago. He struck off on his own because his mother was struggling to support him and his siblings, and he wanted to ease the financial burden (his father died when he was 12).

"I sat there and talked to my mom for a really long time about it, and she finally agreed to it," he said.

He recalls the places he hitchhiked and train-hopped through since he left.

"Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Alabama, Tennessee, Indiana, Chicago, Missouri, South Dakota, Iowa…"

Texas and Arkansas also make the list, which totals 19 states.

On a return visit home when he was 18, Priest pulled his mother away from making dinner and sat her down.

"Mom, I like men and women," he remembers telling her. "She basically told me, 'It's okay son, I already knew.' I was like, 'How the hell did you know?' She said, 'What kid wears six inch stilettos when he's three?'"

Two years later, Priest has made his home in Chicago's official gay neighborhood, Boystown. Chicago captured his heart when he visited last spring. In July, he returned to Lakeview to stay.

"I love the big city," he said. "I love the crowd, and there's always something to do."

He chose Lakeview because he liked the neighborhood's gay culture, atmosphere and social services.

"I would describe this neighborhood as a place where you can be yourself, don't have to worry about anybody bothering you about who you are or what you're into," he said.

Lakeview's street youth know Priest well, so well that some still forget and call him by his birth name, which he no longer uses.

But despite having a large community in the neighborhood, he prefers to keep to himself. It's easier to evade trouble that way, he says. When you let people in, you never know what can happen, especially on the street. If you're on your own, it's easier to trust the company you keep.

On warm days, Priest might go out toward the lake to sleep, or he might go to one of his "spots" to sleep and stash clothes. He usually has three spots around the neighborhood, secret nooks where he can store clothing and doze during the day.

In August, one was tucked into the architecture of the Inter-American school on Addison. A few paces past the school's jungle gym, up a couple stairs, over a storage shed and onto the roof, and Priest had his own space below an overhanging tree. But he must move quickly, so as not draw attention from the police station on the other side of the playground.

That spot was compromised months ago, however, when someone saw him and called police. That day, Priest woke up to a female officer standing above him. He joked to her that he might just be having a good dream.

Priest spends a lot of time being bored, he said. Despite the neighborhood's excitement, there are times when there is just nothing to do. He regularly applies for jobs using a resume he built at the Broadway Youth Center, but so far that hasn't worked out. He is honest about the fact that he's homeless, and it usually counts as a strike against him.

"It gets very frustrating… you get interviews but then all of the sudden they come back around and say, 'We have somebody else that is more experienced than you,'" he said. "Or they just blatantly say, 'We don't want you.' So it gets your hopes up a bit, but then it gets crashing back down."

Priest changes his look regularly. One day, he and friend got a hold of army fatigues, and they walked around the neighborhood confusing passersby. When asked, Priest told them he was part of the anarchy militia. Another time, he got novelty contact lenses that made it look like he had lizard eyes.

But despite the playful atmosphere of the world he sometimes inhabits, being homeless is difficult he says.

"For someone who is rich and has never been homeless, they wouldn't really comprehend what we go through on a daily basis," he said. "You can't sit down wherever you want. You can't rest wherever you want. You can only do things at certain times. You can only sleep at certain times."

The first time he became homeless, he said, it was hard to handle. He couldn't sleep because he was used to having a bed. Now, after sleeping on cardboard and concrete, he isn't sure how he would deal with having a bed.

GENERATION HALSTED

Want more Priest?

Next week's issue will feature a Priest photo essay, plus an exclusive video tour of Boystown.

Look for WindyCityTimes on

YouTube vimeo

www.youtube.com/windycitytimes
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Rain or shine, the Night Ministry offers condoms, food and entertainment to street-based youth. Its outreach van parks at the intersection of Halsted and Belmont two nights a week. Photos by Bill Healy.

GENERATION HALSTED

LGBTQ Youth Series from WINDY CITY TIMES

Colby Mowery runs the weekly Safe Haven dinner where he passes out clothing. Many Chicagoland Community Church members view homosexuality as a sin, but here, Mowery gives a feminine trans youth a dress and high heels. Photos by Bill Healy.

'Beauty isn't everything, but it does take you a hell of a ways'

BY ERICA DEMAREST

"She took me to the side, and said, girl, you need to wash up," Shena, 20, said with a laugh, as she recalled one of the first times she met her best friend Diamond.

Shena was about 15 or 16 years old. She had just relocated to Chicago from Kentucky "to get away from my family," and hadn't yet learned the ins-and-outs of maintaining her appearance on the streets.

"Just because you're going through a struggle doesn't mean you have to look like it," deadpanned Diamond, 29, a lifelong Lakeview resident whose current housing situation is unstable. "The thing is—You don't want to look homeless. You don't want to smell."

For many of the street-based youth in Chicago's Lakeview neighborhood, clothing and hygiene rank highly as survival tools.

Windy City Times found that a significant portion of youth interviewed have internalized stigmas and stereotypes about homelessness. As a result, many of these young people work especially hard to blend in.

"It is very important that we camouflage into our community," said Robert Dibbles, 25, who has been homeless or precariously housed since he came out of the closet as a teen. "I don't want to look like a stereotype bum. I'm not. I struggled. I've been through a lot in my life. But I want to look like I belong on the street with you."

Maintaining a positive perception can help youth avoid harassment or stigmatization, Dibbles explained.

"In the beginning, I was talked about," he said. "I smelled bad. I had on dirty clothes… I slept in parks… No one would hire me."

Today, Dibbles volunteers with several LGBT and homeless organizations and is taking steps to continue his education. He said a positive attitude and image were partly responsible for his success.

"If I'm off and I don't look cute, then my day is not cute," Dibbles said. "It's hard to get my mind right."

Building that image is often tricky, however, as many youth rely on local shelters, social service agencies and churches for clothing and toiletries.

The Chicagoland Community Church, Lakeview Pantry and StandUp for Kids—among others—offer free clothing, which is typically used and donated by community members. And the Broadway Youth Center (BYC) gives young people a $25 Brown Elephant voucher once a month.

"I wear whatever fits me and is practical," said Drakéra, 20, a trans woman who lacks stable housing. "At the Brown Elephant, the stuff is still pretty expensive. And the stuff they have on sale doesn't really fit—either it's a couple sizes too small or it's been altered."

Drakéra said she'd like to maintain a more curated style, but for now, is grateful for the donations.

When it comes to beauty, many young people rely on one another. The Youth Lounge at Broadway United Methodist has begun offering manicures and pedicures; the BYC regularly makes sheers and scissors available for haircuts. And it is not uncommon to see youth styling one another's hair or offering beauty advice.

"Beauty isn't everything, but it does take you a hell of a ways," said Destiny, 19, a trans woman who lives on the South Side but frequents Lakeview for its inclusivity. She credits the neighborhood's trans women for teaching her how to dress for her body type. And like Shena before her, Destiny is appreciative of her peers' honesty.

Many youth view it as their responsibility to look out for new arrivals, Dibbles said. And taking care of one's chosen family extends to matters of appearance.

"[If someone looks bad], I'm not going to tell her: Girl, you look ravishing; the boys are going to be all over you," Dibbles said. "No. They won't. Because they weren't all over me."

Several programs offer shampoo, deodorant and other toiletries. Showers are available at the Crib, the Night Ministry's LGBT-friendly shelter, which houses 20 youth per night (a daily lottery determines who will receive a bed for the evening). And when the Crib was closed this past summer, the Youth Lounge offered Sunday showers to fill the service gap.

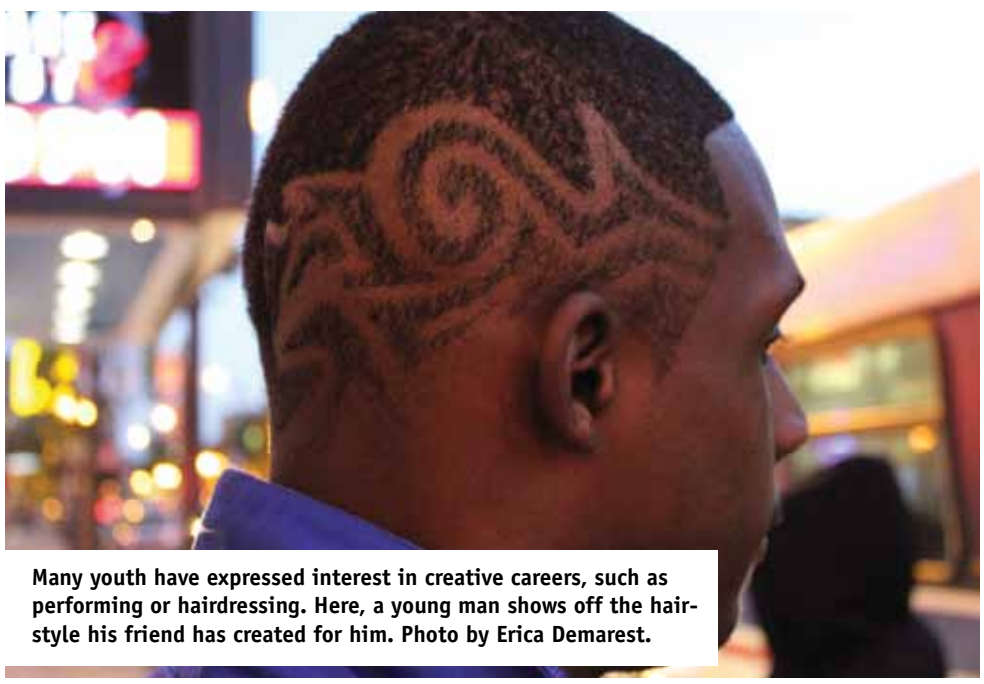
Still, many young people rely on public restrooms to change clothes and wash up.

"I learned how to [get ready] quick," Diamond said. "If you take too long, you could have people watching you when you go in the bathroom and timing you, and then you can get banned.… I try to be courteous… You've got to know your pace. If it'll normally take you about 30 minutes to get ready, make it 15. If it's 15, cut that in half."

When Windy City Times asked Diamond how people would treat her if she didn't maintain her hygiene and appearance, she said: "I don't want to find out. They already treat me bad enough for not having a job."

Diamond continued: "They say cleanliness is next to godliness, but for me, cleanliness is next to sanity. If you feel clean, if you look good, you feel like, okay, I can conquer what I need to conquer. I can make it through another day… But if you're out here stanking, and people don't want to be around you, that will put you into a shell, where you just say, I really do want to kill myself."

Strangers take cues from each other's appearance, Shena said. "You've got to point people in the right direction."



Many youth have expressed interest in creative careers, such as performing or hairdressing. Here, a young man shows off the hairstyle his friend has created for him. Photo by Erica Demarest.

Shampoo, conditioner and toothpaste are among the items available at the twice-monthly Youth Lounge at Broadway United Methodist Church. Volunteers donate toiletries and clothing. Photo by Kate Sosin.

GENERATION HALSTED

LGBTQ Youth Series from WINDY CITY TIMES

Friends like brothers: Brian and Eric

BY KATE SOSIN

Brian (left) and Eric. Photos by Kate Sosin.

Brian and Eric are brothers, not by blood, but by choice and circumstance.

They're like Carter and Lee from the 1998 film "Rush Hour," Eric says. Best friends.

"We've been through a lot," says Eric.

"We just talk to each other," Brian adds.

Brian and Eric have much common. They're both 18. They attended the same high school. They've bounced between the same housing agencies the past two years. Both survived abuse as kids. And both like hanging out in Lakeview, where they have found a large peer community.

Everybody knows them here, says Brian.

They're sitting in a room at the Broadway United Methodist Church, where youth advocates host a bi-weekly program for young people called Youth Lounge. The four-hour program is a space where youth can get hot meals, play video games, participate in planned activities and hang out without being told by police to keep walking. It's also a space that seeks to affirm LGBTQ youth.

Eric and Brian come here to see friends. Both identify as straight, but their peer group in Lakeview is made up of people of many orientations and identities.

"We just made friends over here, and they just keep asking us to come back and stuff," says Brian matter-of-factly.

Brian grew up in Iowa and lived with his mom until he was 11 or 12. When he was 10, things with his mother took a turn for the worse.

"She started letting her boyfriends abuse me," Brian recalls. "They started beating on me and my brother and sister. Eventually I told on them."

Brian reported two of the men to the police, and authorities placed him in the care of relatives. When he was 16, he found his way to Lawrence Hall Youth Services and moved into its housing program.

Eric, for his part, grew up on Chicago's South Side. For a time, he lived with his parents and three younger brothers at 87th and Lowe.

"Basically, we lived in an abandoned house," Eric says."We didn't have food or nothing, no clothes…My parents basically was on drugs and stuff. My dad, every time he got drunk…he used to beat on my momma."

Eric says that when he was eight, his biological parents abused him. One day, he and his brothers found themselves locked into the abandoned house. His father had bolted shut the gates over the doors. The building was on fire, and the four had no way of getting out.

A woman saw Eric trying to escape and called 911.

All four brothers survived the fire, and were placed into the hands of a foster mom who eventually adopted them.

But by the time Eric was 16, however, the cost of the kids had proven too steep for her to sustain. Eric offered to go out on his own to ease her financial strain.

"It was kinda hard for her," Eric says. The foster mother told Eric she loved him and didn't want him to leave. But Eric told her to focus on his younger brothers.

"I was crying," he says. "It's hard to see your mom or someone you love cry."

Shortly after he left the house, Eric met Brian at a North Side Kmart.

Eric had just escaped a fight with another group of kids, and he was still upset when he ran into Brian. Brian assured Eric he wasn't looking to fight, and he calmed Eric down.

The two started talking, and Brian told Eric about Lawrence Hall. Eric moved into Lawrence Hall shortly after, and the two quickly formed a close bond.

"We never really got to know each other that well when we first met at Kmart," says Brian. "It was a good relationship, but it got even better when we went to Lawrence Hall."

At Lawrence Hall, the two looked out for each other. When Eric was upset about something, he went and talked to Brian. If one ran out of money, the other helped out.

"Everybody was picking on me, and he's the only one that stands up for me," Brian says.

"Still do," Eric adds.

Two years later, both have moved into housing through Teen Living Programs. Brian graduated high school, and Eric is in his senior year.

Together, they discovered Lakeview, and they have been coming ever since. It is a place where they see new things all the time, says Brian.

But it's also hard. Because many of the young people are street-based, they tend to come and go. Friends find housing and stop coming, or they move on to other places.

But for each other, the two have remained constant.

"We've been through a lot," Eric says. "We're basically brothers."

Drakéra, 20, adds ranch dressing (her favorite) to dinner at the Crib, the Night Ministry's LGBT-friendly shelter. Photo by Bill Healy.

Koala. Photos by Bill Healy.

Koala

18 years old
Indentifies as bisexual

On being young
"I'm just enjoying my youth. A lot of people think that 'cause I'm 18, that I won't be able to hold a conversation, or that I must not be on their level. Is it really all about being on somebody's level? I'd rather get to know them than be on their level."

On coming out
"I came out. People found it shocking. Most of them didn't believe me. Some of them did. Some of them rejected me. Some of them accepted me. I just roll with it."

On the youth of Boystown
"Everybody out here, they smoke, drink, have sex, sometimes debate about religion."

GENERATION HALSTED

LGBTQ Youth Series from WINDY CITY TIMES

Stormy Monroe

22 years old
Identifies as transgender

BY KATE SOSIN

Stormy Monroe sums up life without housing in two words: horrible and terrible. But she has a method for getting through each day.

"With every brush of my hair, with every sway of my hips, that's how I do it," she said.

Monroe grew up on Chicago's West Side, and she came to Lakeview to be with friends. She has yet to find steady housing. For now, she is staying at The Crib, The Night's Ministry's LGBTQ-affirming shelter.

Though she's out to her family, things haven't been easy.

"My parents found out along down the line," she said. "They weren't too happy about it. They're still not too happy about it. But hey, it's my life."

In Lakeview, Monroe was drawn into street life quickly, she said. In some cases it has gotten her into trouble. She spent four-and-a-half months behind bars after she and some friends were caught staying in an apartment that wasn't theirs and taking things from the house, she said (Monroe added that she believed the apartment belonged to another youth).

But trouble also seeks her out, she said. Police often assume that because she is trans, she is doing sex work, a narrative common among many trans women.

Monroe spends a lot of time at the library reading. According to Monroe, she is banned from both Center on Halsted and Broadway Youth Center, so her resources in the neighborhood are currently limited.

"Being a trans woman, there's a certain type of maintenance you have to keep to yourself," she said. "It's very hard to keep that maintenance when you're being told when to go, when to stay."

Monroe sometimes walks through the neighborhood and eyes the fancy condos.

"Sometimes, I'm looking at it, and I'm like, 'Oh, I wish,'" she said. But she keeps her eyes on goals more immediately obtainable. She just enrolled in classes at Harold Washington College.

She wants people to know that LGBTQ street-based youth are open to support from others.

"I just want them to know that we all aren't all bad," she said. "A lot of us come from shaken homes and broken love."

Photos by Kate Sosin.

Javontae, 20, watches television at a gas station on the corner of Addison and Halsted. Photos by Bill Healy.

Will listens to headphones as he finishes ice cream at Chicagoland Community Church's Safe Haven dinner. His wife Diamond, 29, folds new pants from the church's clothing closet. Photos by Bill Healy.

next week in

GENERATION HALSTED

An in-depth look at the Broadway United Methodist Church's innovative Youth Lounge. Photo essay: Overnight in Boystown. Watch what really happens.

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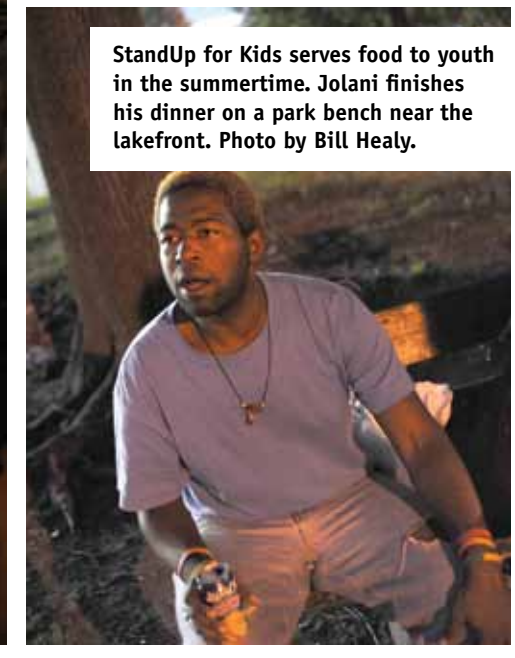
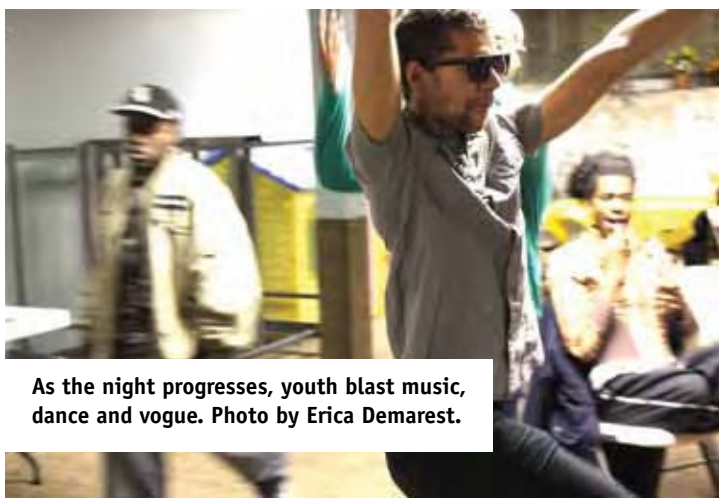


StandUp for Kids serves food to youth in the summertime. Jolani finishes his dinner on a park bench near the lakefront. Photo by Bill Healy.

LGBTQ Youth Series from WINDY CITY TIMES

Z Williams. Photo by Erica Demarest.

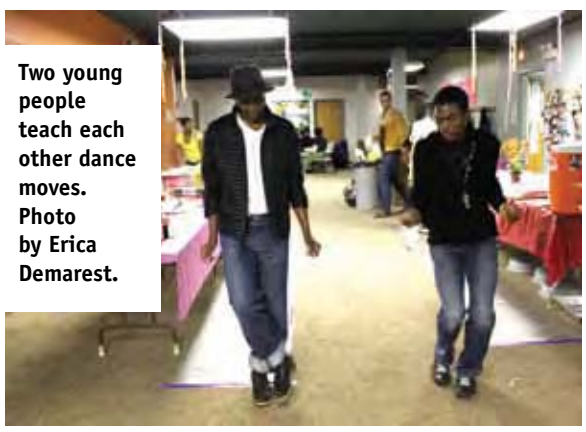


As the night progresses, youth blast music, dance and vogue. Photo by Erica Demarest.

An attendee chats his with younger brother between bites of stew. Photo by Kate Sosin.

The Youth Lounge has operated a volunteer-run beauty parlor since Nov. 2011. "When we're cared for, we feel better about ourselves," the Rev. Lois Parr says. "There's a direct connection to self-esteem." Photo by Erica Demarest.

A volunteer dishes out hot food to one young person. He and his younger brother traveled to the Youth Lounge from the South Side to hang out with friends. Photo by Kate Sosin.



Two young people teach each other dance moves. Photo by Erica Demarest.

Attendees chat with volunteers while their nails are prepped for manicures. Photos by Kate Sosin.

Z's Church

BY ERICA DEMAREST

Four hours before her guests are set to arrive, Z Williams bustles about the United Broadway Methodist Church basement, making sure every detail is just right.

Carpets must be vacuumed. Colorful tablecloths are strategically arranged. Fresh flowers dot the dinner tables.

As visitors walk through the front door, they're greeted by the comforting smell of a home-cooked meal. Today, it's hearty beef stew paired with thick, fluffy cornbread.

"I like to look at it like we're having guests over," Williams says. "That requires a lot more time than just placing down some tables and chairs, but it's worth it."

For the last two-and-a-half years, Williams has run the Youth Lounge, Broadway Untied Methodist's LGBTQ-affirming drop-in program. Every second and fourth Saturday, the Lakeview church opens its doors to youth, who get hot meals, toiletries, entertainment (Wii, movies) and a place to relax.

Anywhere from 50 to 70 young people gather in the church's sprawling basement. Some scarf down platefuls of food; others braid one another's hair. Tables are pushed aside for a vogue competition, and about a dozen youth nap, curled up around one another, in a dim annex.

The scene reads more 'hangout' than 'youth program,' and that's the point, Williams says.

When Williams (who had been volunteering with LGBT youth for years) first started kicking around the idea of a youth lounge, she and pastor Lois McCullen Parr visited other Boystown programs. While the pair liked much of what they saw, they often uncovered rules, restrictions and guidelines that could be punitive toward the youth. In some cases, these dictates prevented young people from accessing programming.

"We decided to implement a very unique approach here: no rules," Williams says. "There are no rules whatsoever to our program. You don't come in and see a list of things you have to abide by. I believe if you raise the standard, it will give the young people something to aspire to … . It's risky, but it's working. It's definitely working."

The first lounge, which was hosted in March 2010 on a $50 budget, brought in about a dozen youth. Word-of-mouth praise spread like wildfire, and numbers soon doubled and tripled. By March 2011, the lounge had gone from meeting once a month to twice.

"Being young and able to congregate with like-individuals in a structure where you're not being policed—that gave the young people a sense of freedom that they really treasure," Williams says. "Some people think the answer to everything is structure, and that's not the case."

When conflict arises during a lounge, Williams says, the youth often solve issues amongst themselves.

"I think some traditional church people would come in here and say: This is a church?!" Parr says with a laugh. "The youth will be horsing around and playing cards or whatever, and somebody will say, 'Fuck that bitch.' And then someone else will go, 'Man, watch your language. Language!' There's this kind of self-policing that happens that is respectful."

Lounges run from 4:30-8 p.m. and feature little outward structure. Youth are free to eat, sleep, dance, play games or partake in programming—such as free manicures and pedicures or writing workshops—as they please.

Parr uses the analogy of a basement. All across the country, there are teenagers in their parents' basements, goofing off, watching TV, eating junk food, taking a nap, dancing and playing Wii.

"The young people here don't have a base-

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GENERATION HALSTED

LGBTQ Youth Series from WINDY CITY TIMES

Lakeview pastor talks 'love work'

BY ERICA DEMAREST

The Rev. Lois McCullen Parr has overseen Broadway United Methodist Church since August 2009. Along with the Rev. Vernice Thorn and volunteer Z Williams, Parr coordinates the church's twice-monthly Youth Lounge, an LGBTQ-affirming space for young people in Lakeview.

Parr recently sat down with Windy City Times to discuss youth programming, theological obligations and the value of volunteers.

Windy City Times: You've called your work with the Youth Lounge an extension of your spiritual mission. What do you mean by that?

Lois Parr: For me, the word 'worship' has a broader definition than just an hour on Sunday morning.

When we started [the lounge], we were specific to say: It's up to the youth to initiate relationships. At the first lounge, I didn't know anybody's name. And I thought: For young people to come in here and have this white 50-year-old woman say, 'Let's have a conversation. I want to know you,' is not loving. Not really. It's not meeting somebody where they are, which is, 'I need space.'

Now I know the names and stories of 20-odd regulars. Some of them would tell you they were here a long time before they knew I was a pastor [laughs]—which is not a bad thing. These youth are, for good reason, suspicious of the church. Our hope is to redefine church—not by preaching about God or Jesus, or anything like that, but to be faith in action.

Z [Williams] has termed that our 'love work,' and I think that's accurate.

WCT: What does it take to host one Youth Lounge? [The lounge operates on second and fourth Saturdays, from 4:30-8 p.m.]

LP: We like to have at least 10 volunteers. Some of us will come for setup at noon and stay until 9 p.m. cleanup. That's tiring. A couple of us are preachers the next day, and that's really hard. You need to have energy to be here because the young people have energy.

WCT: What does it cost each week?

LP: We benefit from great in-kind giving. Youth Lounge is not a separate entity, which means that everything—the space, utilities, toilet paper, paper towels, kitchen, water, bathrooms—is [covered by] Broadway United Methodist. If we were to add that up or rent a space, it would be a pretty big expense.

Another built-in cost-saver for us is that we operate entirely with volunteers. We're the cleanup crew, and if the toilet is stopped up—like it was this week—we're the plumber. That's just a huge number of volunteer hours committed to making it happen.

And all of our meals are donated. [Youth Lounge feeds 50-70 each week.] We are a congregation of about 130 people, and every two weeks, we have a sign-up list … . I'm always astonished at how much it is. Individuals bring a bag of onions, two boxes of spaghetti, ground beef, whatever … and our [volunteer] cooks put it together. We do have a kitchen here, but it's not a big kitchen. I feel like our chief cook is a miracle worker.

WCT: So, is it accurate to say that you don't spend a lot of money? It all boils down to donations and volunteers.

LP: That's what makes it. Totally.

WCT: Theoretically, if another group had the space and volunteers, it'd be pretty easy to replicate the Youth Lounge, right?

LP: Right. We've dreamed about replicating it on the South and West Sides.

WCT: Why hasn't anyone else done it?

LP: The way we operate is, some people would say, risky. We don't have rules published at the door. We don't make people show us an ID or leave their bags anywhere. Some people would say: You're asking for trouble.

That's not been our experience. When you treat people with love and respect, they respond, and they rise to the occasion.

We've had 56 Youth Lounges so far, and we've probably had about six incidents. Six! Ain't nobody else got that record. Six! We don't have any guards at the door. Sometimes there's an escalated moment because somebody calls someone else a bitch, and it gets out of hand. People are living so precariously that it's easy to react in a hurry. But six incidents tells me that it makes a difference when you respect the youth.

WCT: Can you tell us the 'hole in the wall' story?

LP: We had an incident about a year ago where a fight suddenly broke out. People were horsing around, and in a flash, one person shoved another into the drywall downstairs; the guy went straight through the wall.

We decided: Let's not fix it. At the next Youth Lounge, we sat down with the young people and asked them what to do.

Several said, 'Can we help fix it? We'd like to help fix it.' [At the church,] we have an annual event called Hanging of the Greens, where we decorate for Christmas, so we decided to have the young people come. There were more youth than we needed for the wall, so they started to decorate with the congregation. The young people really took ownership of the space they called 'home.'

But I'll repeat: 56 lounges, six incidents. I think not everybody is willing to operate that way. I think for some people, it's too scary. You have to trust yourself to be okay in the space if it feels hairy. And I think you have to trust that the young people ultimately aren't interested in doing harm.

WCT: Some people might hear that wall story and worry about the financial risks associated with creating a similar program.

LP: Honestly, I don't think it's about that. I don't think it's about a financial risk, or 'Does our insurance cover it?' I think it's about people's emotional response to groups of young Black people. This is going to sound harsh, but I think some people are just scared. There are stories told of violence and destruction here in Boystown, but the youth here show respect. Because I give respect.

WCT: You train your volunteers in asset-based language. Can you tell us about that?

LP: It's how we talk and think about our young people, who come in with a lot of energy. This goes back to Take Back Boystown. Let's say a young Black man comes in the door, and he seems really angry. So, what happens if I don't label that as anger? What happens if I say: A passionate young man has just come in the door? That changes how we think about him.

That's the difference between giving and feeling sorry for somebody, versus giving to be in relationship with somebody. It's the difference between pity and compassion.

At the end of the night—especially in winter when it's cold out—[the volunteers] would all just sit around and mope. So we couldn't even give thanks for having spent four very successful hours with these young people because we were sad that we can't do more. Sometimes volunteers would say, 'I really just feel so sorry for them. I don't know where they're going to sleep.'

It's easy to get burnt out as a volunteer. So, how do we transform our thinking to say, 'I don't feel sorry for these young people. They have enormous resiliency and assets.' How do we claim the gifts we see in these young people and affirm them, rather than have this sense of separation?

WCT: How have neighbors reacted to the Lounge?

LP: Our first year, we kept intentionally quite a low profile. At our one-year anniversary, we sent a note to the neighbors and invited them to be involved. Most people were really positive, but one person was really, really ugly and left heinous, hateful messages on my voicemail.

And then the summer came, and Take Back Boystown happened. Somebody made an anonymous flyer claiming we directly support prostitution, drug dealing and violence in Lakeview. That's an absurd thing for anybody to say. Our reputation as Broadway Church is pretty well known, so people—including some of the media—responded supporting us.

WCT: Were there any repercussions?

LP: There was a short period of time that same summer, where the young people were really comfortable here and started sleeping on the patio. Our initial response was, 'We love you, you're safe here, you can stay there.' They got harassed, and we got some ugliness from neighbors. We had to turn the youth away. The truth is: It would jeopardize the Youth Lounge, which we weren't willing to do. We wish we had a shelter, but we don't.

At that time, it felt like: Gee, the neighbors are really breathing down on us. But the truth is: It wasn't the neighbors. It was a couple people. And they were loud.

The summer of 2011 was very tough. In contrast, this summer was a very positive experience.

WCT: Your congregation is committed to an anti-racism work. How does that play out in Lakeview?

LP: We know that a lot of the young people of color who come to Lakeview as a place where they can be safe, experience racism. We also know that young people who are survivors can get into conflict.

This is a social and philosophical, and I suppose political, comment. When a young Black man on the street, who, with his friends or alone, has been spit on, yelled at, had the police called about him, had a false arrest, has been questioned or searched by the police—or just been told be passersby, 'This is not your part of town. Get out of here. You're a hoodlum.'—to me, that is institutional and cultural violence.

So when young people walking down the street respond in anger, I do not personally believe they're initiating violence. They're responding to the violence of racism that's already been perpetuated on them.

Every day, people of color are negotiating the spaces they walk into, and white people don't have to. We are culpable as a culture, as a society, as a neighborhood. For us to ever say that young people who might do a desperate thing or start a fight are initiating anything is false. It's just false.

We need to examine our role in the social construct that makes it possible for people to not have a place to sleep or get a meal. It's your work as a citizen, as a human being, to look at how you participate in systems that create an environment where a 17-year-old Black kid might throw a punch. Why? If I talk to that kid, I can hear a lot of good reasons why he's angry.

The Rev. Lois Parr. Photos by Erica Demarest.

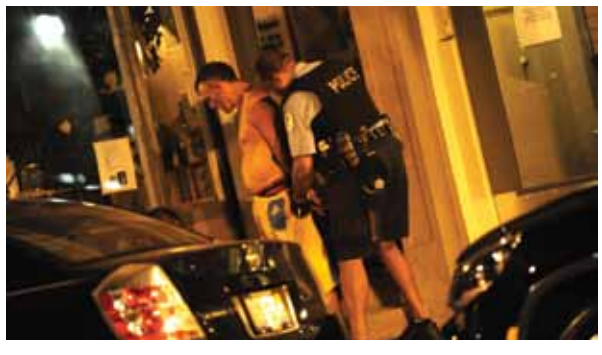
The Rev. Lois Parr answers emails in her office.

GENERATION HALSTED

LGBTQ Youth Series from WINDY CITY TIMES

Overnight in Lakeview:

Photos by Bill Healy, Erica Demarest, Kate Sosin.



Lakeview residents have increasingly recounted overnight mayhem along their streets on summer weekends. Windy City Times (WCT) has received reports of people passed out on lawns, party-goers jumping on cars and trash filling the streets. For those who visit Lakeview on sunny afternoons, after the trash has been cleaned and before the clubs start blasting beats, the description of a neighborhood out of control is hard to imagine.

In August, WCT documented the neighborhood's drama for a night. A team of six reporters, equipped with cameras, notebooks and audio equipment, set out into the neighborhood to document how it changes from sundown to sunup. What follows are highlights from that Saturday evening and Sunday morning.

7:17 p.m. The sun is starting to set in the neighborhood. It's a warm night, and the streets are relatively quiet. The restaurants are full of people eating dinner.

8:04 p.m. Groups of people start appearing along Halsted.

10:28 p.m. At the corner of Buckingham and Halsted, people are walking past Nookie's. Everyone seems pretty chipper and relatively sober.

10:40-10:53 p.m. At Spin nightclub, the doorman dons a skimpy "Black Swan" costume. He checks in guests wearing similarly elaborate get-ups. Youth are congregating at the corner of Buckingham and Halsted. A few spill over into the street. No one seems to mind.

11:09 p.m. A taxi barrels down the street, windows down, blasting "Move Bitch" by Ludacris. People dance on the sidewalk. Two men walk southbound on Halsted carrying Jewel Osco bags and loaves of French bread.

11:15 p.m. Windy City Times reporters notice police handcuffing a man on the western side of Halsted Street. When the police realize reporters are watching them, they flash peace signs, let the man go and walk away.

11:30-11:32 p.m. Five police officers, in bright yellow vests, walk southbound on Halsted outside of Whole Foods, taking up the entire sidewalk. Two additional police officers, also dressed in bright yellow tops and black trousers, round the corner of Waveland and follow their co-workers down the street. A police SUV drives past Whole Foods, for a grand total of eight police officers on one block within two minutes.

1:28 a.m. About 30 people gather outside Scarlett, blocking the sidewalk entirely. The din has risen considerably, and the streets are packed. People shout, dance, climb in and out of cabs, and pour in and out of clubs.

1:35 a.m. At the intersection of Roscoe and Halsted, visibly drunk people crowd the street. Bar/club patrons walk in front of cars and cabs; drivers and pedestrians yell at one another. Trash has started to appear along the sidewalks. What appears to be dozens of napkins are scattered over the sidewalk in front of Roscoe's, where a large crowd blocks the sidewalk. The garbage cans along Halsted are already full.

1:46 a.m. On Halsted, dozens of people wearing tropical, luau-themed outfits sleepily pour out of a coach bus, and unload coolers and duffle bags.

1:53 a.m. Two EMTs sleep in their ambulance with the engine still running. Two women who appear to be intoxicated walk along Halsted. "We could go to the lakefront and drink it," one says to the other.

2:03 a.m. At the corner of Halsted and Waveland, an older man on the street begs for money with an outreached cup. "I'm hungry, ma'am," he says to a woman outside Kit Kat Lounge & Supper Club. The woman laughs and says "I'm hungry too!" as she walks away.

2:14 a.m. Two people in head-to-toe costumes pose along the sidewalk in front of Tulip Toy Gallery, as they distribute promotional flyers. One wears a skin-tight zebra costume; the other appears to be a leopard.

3:28 a.m. Most of the bars have closed. Mostly youth remains, and the streets are significantly quieter. Earlier, crowds were predominantly white. Now, most of the people outside are Black. A few stragglers remain near bars and clubs. The trash cans along Halsted are overflowing with garbage.

3:56 a.m.-4:08 a.m. Smokers gather outside Berlin. Some ask around to see if anyone has weed. Several people start to make their way to the red line as Berlin empties. Others climb into cabs, while some stand around and chat with friends.

4:31 a.m. The Starbucks at Belmont and Clark is crowded, mostly with people napping or sleepy-eyed. A homeless youth sleeps with her head on a counter by the window. Inside, a few other young people chat with a worker from The Night Ministry.

5:26 a.m The sky is brightening with the sunrise, and the neighborhood is quiet save for the shush of passing cars. Trash lines the streets on both sides of Belmont. There are bottles, a crushed Cheetos bag, Starbucks cups, confetti and 7-Eleven pizza boxes. The window of a neighborhood dry cleaner is shattered but still standing. A glass with half a drink sits on the stoop of another Halsted business.

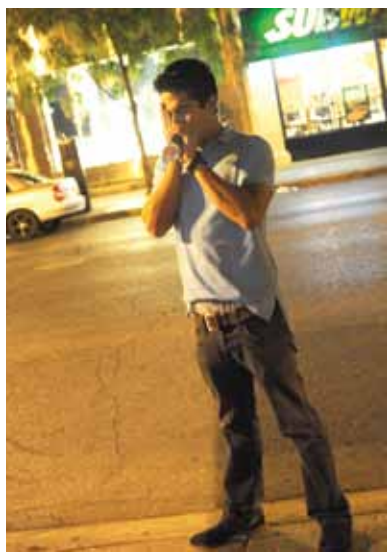
5:36 a.m. The streets are now nearly silent. The night over, one queer homeless youth heads off to find a place to sleep. Two men hail a cab. Moments later, two other men appear from an alley, looking slightly disheveled.

Follow this series for numbers on crime in Lakeview, interviews with police, thoughts from service providers and reflections from youth.

GENERATION HALSTED

LGBTQ Youth Series from WINDY CITY TIMES

A timeline



Z Williams grabs ice cream with a young person. The Youth Lounge stocks toppings like strawberry sauce, cookie crumbles and M&Ms. "We go above and beyond," Williams says. "Ask any of the youth: We have the best food around." Photo by Erica Demarest.

CHURCH from page 10

ment," she says. "So it's not a small thing to open your door twice a month and say: Come and be who you are here. If that means acting a fool, act a fool. Just be yourself, because yourself is a wonderful thing."

Many of the youth who visit the Youth Lounge identify as LGBT. A large number are homeless or precariously housed, and many have been shunned from families due to their sexual orientation or gender identity.

"I think it's so brave of the young people now to be able to experiment and explore," Williams says. "That courage that I see in them constantly gave me the courage to look into myself and step beyond … a lifetime that has not been true to who I was."

When this reporter first met Williams two years ago, she used male or female pronouns and dressed androgynously. Today, the 58-year-old proudly identifies as a trans woman and credits the youth with giving her the strength to transition.

"It's been a journey of affirmation for me to see these young people, who in many cases, lost a home, lost family, and ended up with nothing too much more than the streets, just to express who they are," Williams says.

Growing up, Williams tried on her mother's makeup and high heels, but quickly learned to "de-gay" herself to avoid bullies. Later in life, she would identify as gay but always felt "it wasn't far enough."

"There's a lot of work that has to be done within the gay community," Williams says. "To be trans—there's so much negative connotation. That was a weighing factor for me … . If you're living in Boystown—primarily if you're white or middle class—your system is pretty good. But being trans, if you're not in the entertainment field and entertaining the regular people, you're an oddity."

As the Youth Lounge progressed and Williams developed close relationships with more and more young people, she felt both inspired and obliged to transition.

"I grew up in a very, very strict household," Williams says. "I honestly believe that if I had the courage to be honest to who I was at that time, that I would be in the same situation as these young people. I believe that with all my heart, so I feel a kinship to them … . There's a lot of responsibility that comes along with that."

Several youth have dubbed Williams "Mother Z" or the "Mother of Belmont," and many refer to Broadway United Methodist as "Z's Church."

Williams takes special pride in mentoring young trans women, whom she encourages to express non-stereotypical forms of femininity. There's more to being a trans female than long wigs and push-up bras, she says.

Slowly, Williams has seen young people grow into themselves, just as she has.

"This is not a pipe dream," Williams says. "This is not a space where young people come in, feel good, and go on their merry way. Our philosophy is that we work from the inside out … . We try to make the young people feel good, because once you have that feeling of self-worth, you will find a way to improve your condition."

Williams beams with motherly pride as she recounts a recent conversation: A volunteer at the Crib (The Night Ministry's LGBT-friendly shelter) told Williams she could tell when the Youth Lounge has been in session. Youth who stay at the shelter on those nights are calmer and more self-possessed; arguments and incidents are rare.

"We're not trying to cure what these young people are facing in their lives as a whole," Williams deadpans. "We're not equipped for that. … We're giving them a chance. I feel that these young people deserve the best, and I'm determined through this program to give them the best that I can."

To learn more about Youth Lounge, visit www.broadwaychurchchicago.org.

next week in

GENERATION HALSTED

Beyond Boystown: Follow Windy City Times on a trip to 75th and Halsted, learn more about Youth Pride Services, and see how Chicago stacks up nationally.

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LGBTQ Youth Series from WINDY CITY TIMES

Life beyond Halsted

While Lakeview may be Chicago's most visible meeting point for many LGBTQ youth, it is hardly the only one. Some service providers note that many of Chicago's LGBTQ youth and street-based youth never even venture to Boystown.

In this week's installment of Generation Halsted, we look beyond Lakeview to talk with young people in other parts of the city where LGBTQ youth congregate. We also look at Chicago-based youth organizing that is impacting young people nationally, examine some of the local and national numbers around LGBTQ youth and homelessness, and look at Lakeview's youth controversies in the context of other cities.

Reaching Beyond Chicago: YPS goes national

BY KATE SOSIN

There are many reasons Chicago is a good launch pad for talking about the challenges facing LGBTQ youth of color nationally, and Frank Walker can name them: a high death rate this year, a chronic lack funding for LGBT programs in much of the city, and a fixation on HIV prevention that trumps other necessary conversations.

Youth Pride Services (YPS), the organization that Walker founded in 2003, has experienced all of these. But fundraising challenges and struggles at home have had an unexpected consequence for YPS: They've helped it grow.

Earlier this year, the once-local organization changed course to operate nationally. It has launched a nationwide survey of Black LGBT youth, begun a training process for young leaders in every state and booked a calendar that has YPS youth traveling two to three times a month, according to Walker.

He first got the idea to start YPS while working at Horizons Community Center (now Center on Halsted), a North Side LGBT community organization. While most of the Horizons staff members were white, the majority of the youth they served were Black.

"There was a huge influx of youth of color who had to go up to the North Side," Walker said. "I thought that it could lead to some problems down the line, that there was nobody that looks like them at the programming."

Over the years, YPS distinguished itself by emphasizing activism and organizing. The organization operated drop-in services similar to those found at other LGBT agencies, but leadership development was at its core.

While basic services such as hot meals were vital for many young people, Walker explained, others simply wanted gathering spaces and organized programming. YPS became an outlet for youth to learn about community leadership: Its members created programs for their peers, and youth leaders rose from within.

Those leadership roles extended into the city. Walker points to the organization's positive relationship with the Northalsted Business Alliance, the Boystown-based retailers' association.

While tensions have sometimes flared between youth and Boystown business owners in the past, Walker said that YPS has tried to find common ground with the alliance.

"We all agree on one thing, and that is: There shouldn't be any violence," he said. "Youth on youth, youth on patrons…"

YPS youth have worked directly with business owners, Walker said, often discussing neighborhood problems that had arisen for each group.

Anshae Lorenzen, 21, said that his organizing with YPS taught him how to navigate issues that might come up in Lakeview.

"If I have any problems, I usually have the avenues and know what to go through," Lorenzen said, adding that he opts for writing letters over disparaging the neighborhood.

In recent years, however, leadership opportunities for YPS youth increasingly extended beyond Chicago. Organizations and government entities started to contact YPS seeking LGBTQ Black youth perspectives, Walker said, adding that YPS youth were slowly becoming national voices for Black LGBTQ youth.

In May 2011, the National Youth Advocacy Coalition (NYAC), which advocates for LGBTQ youth, closed its doors during hard financial times.

At the same time, YPS found itself struggling to fundraise.

"You can't really compete with the North Side when it comes to fundraising days," said Walker. "After being told 100 times, 'We would have helped you, but we gave out money to the Center [on Halsted] already,' after that, you just get tired of asking. We couldn't survive with a monopoly like that in the city."

Walker said he doesn't begrudge North Side organizations like the Center, but tough financial realities encouraged him to reevaluate YPS's future.

Noting the absence of a national organization like NYAC, YPS stopped its drop-in services and shifted its focus toward national consulting work.

It was a loss in certain ways, Walker conceded, as YPS had to start referring its youth to other service organizations.

But in 2012, YPS started fresh. It launched "A National Strategy for Black Gay Youth," which surveyed 2,500 youth nationally. The results will determine YPS priorities down the road; the organization currently travels two to three times per month.

A growing network of young people nationwide connects to YPS through a unique web login. It allows them to attend virtual meetings, message other youth, post discussion topics, survey their peers nationally and access information about services where they live.

Walker said that YPS has grown 200 percent this fall, an influx he attributes in part to a new generation of LGBT youth coming of age.

Next year, YPS will launch an initiative in the Midwest to address the realities facing Black LGBTQ youth in schools. In Chicago, that will mean pushing for more Gay/Straight Alliance clubs in South Side schools.

Additionally, YPS has started recording the reported number of Black LGBT youth who die in the U.S. each year. Chicago deaths, which total five for 2012, according to Walker, make up a third of those recorded thus far. (Walker points out that this number could be due to media coverage).

Significant work remains when it comes to conversations about Black LGBTQ youth, Walker said.

"We're working on bullying in the schools," he said. "We're working on bullying and police. But there is more bullying happening in the house, in the church, in their regular circle."

And many who work with Black LGBTQ youth throughout the country are consumed by efforts to curb HIV infections, which disproportionately impact youth of color.

That is one issue that Walker struggles to explain.

Earlier this year, San Francisco University published a study showing that Black gay couples were more likely than white gay couples to use condoms. Still, HIV rates among LGBTQ Black youth outpace the general population, a reality that has Walker scratching his head.

The impact has gone far beyond the spread of the virus, Walker noted. It often means that other issues facing LGBTQ youth of color go unaddressed.

"HIV is still more important than marriage equality, housing, or any other issue," he said.

Jamal Marshall, 18. Photos by Bill Healy. See page 19 for more photos.

Jamal

18 years old
Maywood

BY ERICA DEMAREST

When Jamal Marshall came out during his freshman year of high school, he knew only one other gay person—a classmate he'd been friends with since the fourth grade.

"It'd have been way different for me [if I knew about other people]," Marshall says. "I could never really imagine someone being gay. I had no clue how big the population of homosexuals was… At that moment, it just seemed like being gay was really rare."

Through his work with Youth Pride Services (YPS), an advocacy and leadership organization for LGBTQ youth of color, Marshall, 18, hopes to reduce stigma and create positive images of Black gay men for younger generations.

"YPS is about getting people to view us as being normal," Marshall says. "I feel like everyone out here has an equal opportunity."

For Marshall, a high school senior who lives with his mother in Maywood, Ill., much of that work starts at home. He describes his family as tolerant—but not supportive—of his sexual orientation.

Marshall recalls coming out to his mother via text message because "it was kind of awkward to talk to her in person." His mother, a registered nurse, cried for several days and asked Marshall whether he wanted to become a female and wear dresses or makeup.

"She was asking me stereotypical questions based on stereotypes about gay people… and it really, really bothered me," Marshall says. "I feel I've been gay all my life. But for the simple fact that my mom and my family taught me religion, I thought it was wrong, and I kind of questioned myself."

About a year after he told his mother, other relatives discovered Marshall was gay through Facebook. One aunt reacted particularly harshly, calling him out during his final exam week.

"She was texting me, telling me I was going to go to jail, that I was going to put my momma in the hospital—not knowing that my mom already knew," Marshall says. "She told me she didn't love me no more. I was in tears taking my final. I couldn't concentrate. I ended up flunking my final."

Over time, Marshall's family has come around. His aunt—who Marshall describes as a typical Virgo, "that type of person to react first, and then think later"—is now the most accepting of his family. And his mother is warming up to the idea of a gay son.

"We have a lot of youth who have parents who say that they're supportive," YPS founder Frank Walker says, "but they're really more tolerant than supportive."

Marshall explains: "To be supportive, you will embrace the fact that your child is gay, instead of just trying to ignore it and not really bring it up. Like, my mom can't use the word 'gay' or 'boyfriend.' She'll just say 'your friend.' She doesn't really embrace the fact that I'm gay."

Despite the difficulties, Marshall considers himself lucky.

"[My mother's] intentions are always good, and she ain't ever done me wrong," he says. "Compared to how I see most people, it could be ten times worse. You've got people out here, whose parents are kicking them out, sending them to a psychiatrist, beating them… My momma has always been there to hold my hand through it all."

Marshall travels from his Maywood home to the Loop for YPS meetings, a trek he finds daunting but worthwhile because it connects him to the larger gay community. He says there aren't many LGBT resources in the suburbs—echoing a sentiment Windy City Times has heard in countless youth interviews.

As Marshall applies for colleges for next fall, he says his life goals are to be successful and to bridge gaps between gay and straight communities. He credits YPS with connecting him to LGBT peers and leaders, who are helping him come into his own as a gay man and activist.

GENERATION HALSTED

LGBTQ Youth Series from WINDY CITY TIMES

Generation Halsted

is an eight-week series that seeks to capture youth voices not typically represented in Windy City Times and other media. The young people portrayed have many housing situations, gender identities and sexual orientations. The series looks primarily, but not exclusively, at Boystown, where an influx of young LGBTQ people has been a source of controversy. Windy City Times will continue to explore the issues raised here beyond this series.

Drakera, 20, sitting outside the Chicagoland Community Church. Photo by Erica Demarest

Ka'Lil

18 years old
Englewood

BY BILL HEALY

The area where Auburn Gresham and Englewood meet is a thriving gathering spot for LGBT youth. Some of these young people engage in sex work.

Ka'Lil is 18 years old and gay. He lives in Englewood with his mother, who is not supportive of his sexual orientation.

Windy City Times reporters met Ka'Lil while driving around his neighborhood at 2 a.m. on a Thursday. We gave him a $10 Walgreens gift card for his time, a rarity in journalism, but in this instance, a gesture of solidarity.

Windy City Times: What's it like living with a mother who is not supportive of the fact that you are gay?

Ka'Lil: It's hard. It's like hell. What's a good analogy? It's like you're a chicken, and you live in a house full of dogs. It just doesn't mix.

I've been to a shelter cause I been kicked out for being gay. To me it was better than where I was/am. You know what you're going into, being gay. You're at a shelter with a whole bunch of straight people so you already have a guard up, so I really didn't mind it.

I always knew I was gay. I've never had an attraction to females. I first came out when I was 14. [My mom] didn't like it then, and four years later we still don't get along. We still argue. It's hard. [Laughs quietly.]

WCT: You seem smiley right now. Why is that?

K: I feel like in my state, it's better for me to smile, even when I'm angry. It's better for me to smile than to be upset and complain about it. Because I always think: There's somebody worse off than I am. I'm still blessed to have a place to live. Although I don't have a good relationship with [my mother], I'm not gonna let that one situation piss me off.

My mother is very disrespectful towards me. When I was younger, I used to be more disrespectful towards her. But now I just blow it off. But yeah, she's very disrespectful. She says stupid stuff that mothers wouldn't say. It's a lot of stuff.

That's life, I guess.

You take the Beverly neighborhood, a predominantly good neighborhood, and you'll watch it on TV, and they'll have a gay child, and the child will come out, and the parents will be very supportive of them. And my reality in Englewood—that's not gonna happen. That's just like a fantasy.

WCT: Does that make you sad?

K: It don't really bother me no more. I feel like: This is my life. I have to make something out of it myself. I'm grown now. If I don't want to live this life, I'm gonna have to change it on my own.

WCT: You're 18. When did you start doing sex work?

K: I started like a month ago. I don't like prostituting. I actually hate being out here. But at the same time I feel like: My mother does not do anything for me. My family is not supportive of me. I just graduated. I'm grown. It's hard to get a job. You have to make money somehow. And I'm a prostitute; it's how I get by.

WCT: What changed that made you think you should start sex work?

K: What changed is: I can't depend on my friends to provide me with bus cards. You have to want better for yourself. Although prostituting might not seem like the best thing to do, if push comes to shove, everything else fails and jobs are not coming through: I still got phone bills. I don't have clothes. I have to find a way to buy clothes. I don't steal.

Prostituting is not, like, the only thing. I could be going to resource centers. You know, up north on Halsted, I've been there looking at the job resources, and I did applications, but jobs are not booming. They're not calling. So you have to make a way for survival.

Ka'Lil declined to be photographed for this article. To hear the full Ka'Lil interview, visit the Windy City Times website.

Chicago homelessness, by the numbers

10,995

The number of unaccompanied homeless youth (ages 14 to 21) in 2011-2012, according to the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless (CCH).

266

The number of youth shelter beds in Chicago, according to the CCH.

17,255

How many homeless students Chicago Public Schools identified in 2011-2012 (up 10.7 percent from the prior school year). Of these, 98.4 percent were children of color, and 18 percent had been diagnosed with disabilities or development delays.

105,338

The total number of Chicagoans who were homeless during the 2011-2012 school year, according to the CCH. This marks a 12 percent increase from the previous year.

23

The percentage of Chicagoans living below the federal poverty line in 2010, according to the 2011 Report on Illinois Poverty. Another 10 percent were living in extreme poverty (below 50 percent of the federal poverty line).

$18.42

The estimated amount a person in Cook County needs to earn per hour to afford a two-bedroom apartment, according to the National Low Income Housing Coalition.

232,200

The number of people who applied for 40,000 federally subsidized Chicago Housing Authority slots in 2008, according to the Chicago Tribune.

48,000

How many people visit state-funded shelters each year, according to the Illinois Department of Human Services.

48.6

The percentage of Chicago's homeless population who are families, according to a 2011-2012 analysis from the CCH. Children made up 33.8 percent; grandparents were 14.8 percent.

75

The percentage of Chicago's homeless population who are African-American, according to a 2007 point-in-time count by the city of Chicago. About 16 percent were white, 6 percent Latino, and 3 percent other ethnicity.

GENERATION HALSTED

LGBTQ Youth Series from WINDY CITY TIMES

Beyond Lakeview's youth controversies, a snapshot of New York

BY KATE SOSIN

Controversy involving the role of LGBTQ street-based young people in affluent neighborhoods is a story that can be told many in U.S. cities.

In Chicago, discord hit a high point in the summer of 2011 when some Lakeview residents started a Facebook group called "Take Back Boystown" aimed at targeting what they saw as an uptick in crime in Chicago's official gay neighborhood. The group set off a citywide debate about racism and LGBTQ youth receiving services in the neighborhood. Additionally, some accused neighborhood service providers of attracting crime, as youth congregated around their centers.

New Yorkers have faced similar conflicts. In 1999, the Christopher Street Pier, a popular LGBTQ youth hangout in the city's gay neighborhood, began closing down for redevelopment. Youth campaigned to keep the pier a welcoming space for them to hang out, and the organization FIERCE was born (Fabulous Independent Educated Radicals for Community Empowerment).

After the pier reopened with tighter rules, youth continued to congregate along the pier, but many residents complained that youth disturbed the neighborhood.

In 2005, The Villager newspaper published an opinion piece called "Gay youth gone wild: Something has got to change." In it, authors Dave Poster and Elaine Goldman wrote that, "What have been the Village's greatest assets — its acceptance and diversity — have become its greatest liabilities."

"While residents and merchants attempt to carry on with their lives and businesses on Christopher Street, hundreds of unruly youths parade this only thoroughfare to and from the Pier, creating havoc on the way," they added later.

Other cities like San Francisco and Denver have faced their own questions about the role of LGBTQ street-based youth in the communities around them. And youth in many cities have built their own groups and organizations to make themselves heard.

The numbers nationally

20-40

The national estimated percentage of homeless youth who are LGBT, according to most studies and reports on the topic.

300,000

The conservative estimated number of LGBTQ youth who experience at least one night of homelessness a year in the U.S., according to the National Alliance to End Homelessness.

58

The national percentage of homeless LGBT youth who have been sexually assaulted, according to data from the National Gay and Lesbian Taskforce, Human Rights Campaign and Master of Social Work program at the University of Southern California.

94

The national percentage of homeless service providers that work with LGBT youth, according to a survey published by the Williams Institute, The Palette Fund and the True Colors Fund.

46

The percentage of young people who fled their homes because of family rejections of their gender identity or sexual orientation, according to a survey published by the Williams Institute, The Palette Fund and the True Colors Fund.

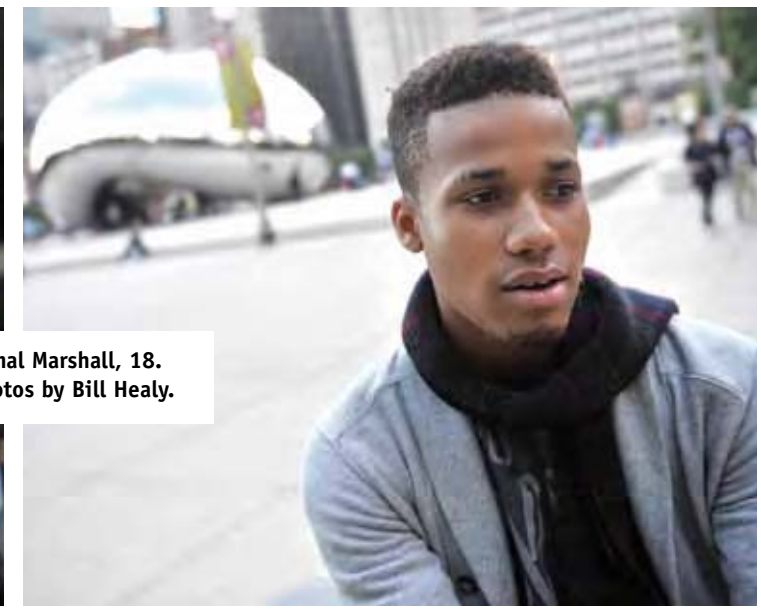
87

The percentage of 2012 anti-LGBTQ and HIV-related murder victims in 2011 that were people of color, as documented by the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs (people of color made up just 49 percent of those studied).

34

The percentage of Black transgender people who live on less than $10,000 a year, as documented in the National Transgender Discrimination Survey.

Jamal from page 17



Jamal Marshall, 18. Photos by Bill Healy.

Jamal Marshall, 18, and Anshae Lorenzen, 21, pose after a Youth Pride Services meeting. Photo by Bill Healy.

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GENERATION HALSTED

Learn more about the LGBTQ Host Home Program (UCAN) and The Crib, The Night Ministry's LGBTQ-affirming shelter.

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Nomi Michaels Devereaux. Photos by Kate Sosin.

Nomi Michaels Devereaux: A year on the streets at 17, remembered

BY KATE SOSIN

Everything changed the year she turned 17.

Nomi Michaels Devereaux started to come out as transgender that year. She discovered Boystown. And she spent her first night on the street, a night that 15 years later, she still remembers perfectly.

"I relive it quite often," she said. "It was scary…I was walking around. I didn't know where to go. I went up to the lake. There was, like, this fitness court. I just sat there, and the police came and they kicked me out of there. So, I just walked all the way up north, found some plastic in a dumpster and wrapped myself up in it and fell asleep near a tree."

Devereaux, 32 now works at The Crib, The Night Ministry's LGBTQ-affirming shelter.

And while she works with young people whose housing situations are as complicated as hers once was, only recently did she tell old friends that she was also once homeless.

Devereaux grew up on Chicago's South Side in the Ida B. Wells Homes in Bronzeville.

Her mother had been a singer in New York, and her father owned some clothing stores in Chicago. For a time during her youth, her family enjoyed a bit of wealth. Her father's stores did well, and the family moved into a large house.

"You know, we got everything," Devereaux said. "And going to this elite public schools and everything."

But over time, that life unraveled. Unknown to the family, her father had been running a side business selling drugs. He had had four kids outside of his marriage. When Devereaux's mother found out, she divorced him. Her father also had an affair with the wife of a business associate, who murdered him in retaliation.

The family's house was repossessed, and they moved back into public housing.

Devereaux's mother was raising her four kids and two cousins.

"Six kids, and we're living in the projects where they're shooting at the windows," Devereaux said. "And [my mother is] on welfare, and she's going to school."

Despite the stress, Devereaux's mother always made time to teach her child everything she could about how to survive in the world.

"She was amazing," Devereaux said. "She gave me everything. It's like she knew that she wasn't going to be here because, everyday, she would stop me in the middle of the street to explain something to me."

Her mother told her to stay in school no matter what. When Devereaux ran home crying one day because classmates called her a fag, her mother told her to deal with it. She was going to be called a fag her whole life.

Devereaux was a handful from a young age, she admitted. She finished her work too quickly and spent her free time disrupting class or just walking out. In fifth grade, she made a decision to stop attending altogether for a while.

By the time she was 12, her school believed she needed more help than her mother could provide, Devereaux said. Her mother suffered a nervous breakdown around that time, and Devereaux ended up in foster care.

She moved in with a foster family of six.

"My foster mother was physically abusive to me," she said. "I was like Cinderella."

In the house, Devereaux was raped repeatedly. Within six months, she was relocated to a group home outside the city. A year later, her mother regained custody.

Devereaux returned to a new home that her mother, now a Chicago Public Schools teacher, had purchased.

In time, she confessed to her mother that she felt she was a girl. Her mother already knew.

"My brother was like, 'don't encourage that,'" Devereaux remembered. "And she was like, 'It's whatever. You'll be a great person.' But she knew. She wanted me to be real."

When Devereaux was 16, her mother died of breast cancer, and their house was sold.

Devereaux stayed with family for a while, but eventually family members kicked her out.

She was 17, transgender and in high school.

That first night, a snow-covered evening in March, Devereaux learned that plastic could keep a person warm even in the coldest weather.

"It was tough, sleeping in the snow and being homeless," she said. "I kept busy. I got up early in the morning, walked. Honey, I was so thin back then."

She slept by the lake most nights. In the morning, she would walk from the lakefront to Mather High School. She arrived at school early enough to slip into the showers with the sports teams that practiced before classes. After school, she might go to a friend's house.

Devereaux still struggled with school, but she remembered her mother's words, and she stuck it out. When teachers passed out books, Devereaux often finished them overnight. She arrived to school with nothing to do, and she didn't hide her boredom.

"I didn't really smoke, but I would light up a cigarette and be walking down the halls smoking a cigarette," she said.

She constantly got into trouble for hanging out in the girls' bathroom, too.

Parentless, she attended her own parent/teacher conferences, where teachers told her that she was a great student with an atrocious attitude.

Neither her school nor friends caught on to the fact she was on her own. Devereaux made up stories to cover her tracks, and friends often invited her over, so she seldom had to make up excuses about why they couldn't come to her house.

Overall, she had a "fabulous experience," she said.

While she was visibly gender-variant, she didn't allow anyone to bully her, and her best friends were the girlfriends of popular jocks.

Among her friends was a guy who lived with his aunt in Lincoln Square. Devereaux went to visit him one day, only to find he had moved. As she was walking away from the building, she noticed a key in the basement door. She opened the door and found rows of empty storage units and a washer and dryer.

She moved in immediately.

There were so many unassigned storage units, that no one noticed one closed door, which Devereaux rigged with a lock. She cooked food on the burner of an old coffee maker she had found and did homework under the basement light. Other tenants saw her so often they assumed she lived there.

"I felt like I had my own place," she said.

Still, she had nightmares about getting caught.

But for much of the time that she was homeless, she didn't see herself that way at all.

"I identified other people as homeless, but I didn't identify myself as homeless," she said.

"To me homeless was a stigma: You're dirty, you smell, you're begging for change, you're missing teeth, your hair is not together. Homelessness was a symbol, and I didn't fit that symbol… when I found Boystown, that's when it really hit me—I'm really homeless."

Devereaux had been dressing in women's clothing and heard about Boystown, somewhere around Clark Street.

She rode the Clark bus up and down looking for signs of it, missing it without even knowing. One day, she finally found her way to the store Gaymart and asked the owner to direct her to Boystown. He pointed out the window.

Devereaux began hanging out in Boystown frequently, and she met other young people who were also without housing. That's when she started to identify as homeless.

That year, Devereaux graduated high school. She went on to study film at Columbia. It was seven more years before she finished her college degree. She experienced bouts of homelessness throughout that time, but she also saw much of the country, staying with friends in New York and Atlanta, among other places.

She pursued a career in singing, a dream she says she has not given up.

She recently told high school best friends that she had been homeless for part of high school. They were shocked.

Today, Devereaux is open about her history with the young people she works with, and she is open with others as well.

About two years ago, Devereaux was planning to leave Chicago and move to New York. She went to Lakeview one night to say goodbye to friends at The Night Ministry's health outreach bus. A service provider told her that The Night Ministry was about to open a youth shelter in the neighborhood, and they wanted her to work there.

"I had to think, this isn't just about me," Devereaux said.

Devereaux turned down a job in New York and started work at The Crib, the best decision of her life, she said.

At The Crib, Devereaux puts her own experiences to work. She employs a bit of tough love when she feels young people are making excuses, but she also knows when the youth are struggling.

"I can look at a person, and I know what's going on," she said. "It's funny because a lot of the trans people there, they don't believe I went through all of that."

Part of the problem with youth homelessness, Devereaux thinks, is the stigma associated with homelessness that prevents people from acknowledging it.

"People even today can't fathom the idea that youth are homeless on the streets," she said. "It's just ridiculous to think that it happens. That's why it's such a big issue…The idea—it's like aliens riding the Red Line."

GENERATION HALSTED

LGBTQ Youth Series from WINDY CITY TIMES

LGBTQ Host Home Program offers different approach to youth homelessness

BY KATE SOSIN

Host home couple Erin Edwards and Liz Przybylski. Photos by Bill Healy.

Erica Phillips was running out of options.

She wasn't exactly homeless, she said. She was a "home-free." She had places to stay, but those were not safe.

Phillips was 18 when she had to go out on her own. That was the winter of 2009.

"It came to a head when my mom told me that she could only love me at a distance," she said. "That's when I left."

For a while, a friend let her crash on his couch, but he had wanted sex in return. She had tried staying at a shelter once, but she couldn't sleep at all.

"This isn't as fun as the Little Rascals made it, or Huckleberry Finn," she remembers thinking. "This isn't Peter Pan. It's like… damn."

Phillips was precariously housed for about two years until one day when she went to get a meal from The Night Ministry, an LGBTQ-friendly service provider. She had not eaten in two or three days at that point.

Two workers asked Phillips if she might be interested in moving into someone's house through a new program. Phillips agreed, was accepted to the program and moved in October 2010. Today, she lives on her own and serves on the advisory board of the LGBTQ Host Home Program.

The LGBTQ Host Home Program (HHP), operated out of UCAN, is unlike any other approach to curbing LGBTQ youth homelessness in Chicago.

It's relatively inexpensive, requires no new buildings or shelter beds, and most significantly, allows youth to make their own choices about their lives.

"So often, when it comes to social services, young people have been so institutionalized, and they've had so many case workers and been involved in housing situations," said Bonnie Wade, who helped start the program and served as its associate director until recently.

Programs that serve youth, which providers generally define as 24 and younger, often structure the days and lives of the youth they serve, telling them when they can eat meals and what time they have to be home.

Wade said that structure works for some but not all.

"It's like a cafeteria, and young people need to come in and choose what option is best for them," Wade said.

The option that HHP provides is the chance to live independently, with support from community members.

In HHP, youth ages 18-24, live with community volunteers who open their homes to a young person for a year or two.

The setup is not based on foster care, a common misconception among LGBTQ Chicagoans. Rather, youth and volunteers are encouraged to think of each other as housemates with equal footing.

From the start, youth and volunteers set "house courtesies" together. UCAN provides some hosts with a monthly stipend, a kind of contribution on behalf of the youth to cover a portion of utilities and rent. Youth are responsible for their food, laundry and other needs.

During their stay, young people get support through UCAN and other agencies. They can find resume help, job training, support applying to college, counseling and other services.

For Phillips, who moved in with a family on the South Side, HHP was an opportunity to be both independent and supported.

"Host Home helped me be a lot more open about myself, about who I am and who I want to be," Phillips said. "They pretty much did for me what I wish I was taught when I was still growing up, like how to do laundry properly or how to do taxes or all these life lessons that you need to have at a certain age."

The volunteers

Erin Edwards and Liz Przybylski had been together a year and a half when the couple decided to host a young person in their North Side home.

HHP matched them with an 18-year-old girl who had felt unsafe at home and felt she could not come out as a lesbian. (Her name has not been included in the story out of respect for her privacy).

UCAN trained Edwards and Przybylski, helping them anticipate issues that might arise once the young person moved in. They were also given a phone number for a 24-hour support line, as was the young woman they hosted.

Edwards and Przybylski had read a letter from the youth, and the three met at the couple's home before deciding to live together. Still, the first night was a little awkward.

"Nobody knew what it would be like," remembers Edwards. "So there was this moment when we were all in the living room reading different things." Someone asked if Abraham Lincoln had really been gay, and they all started talking.

The three had a lot to talk about during those early days, said Edwards. They told each other stories about their lives and got to know each other.

But as time went on, their living situation became more complicated.

Edwards and Przybylski could see the young person struggling at times. She appeared withdrawn, seldom leaving her room or eating.

The UCAN training had prepared them for more blatant conflicts, like a young person swearing in front of a host volunteer's kids, they said. But the youth they hosted struggled with the opposite.

"That was difficult because it hadn't really been addressed," Przybylski said.

They could tell that something was wrong, but they didn't know what to do about it.

Edwards and Przybylski strategized with Wade on how to make the young person comfortable. Sometimes, Edwards, Przybylski and the young woman all cooked together. Other times, they worked in the garden.

Edwards and Przybylski also had help from friends and family, who made a point of inviting the young person when they made plans with the couple. One of the couple's friends also tutored the young woman as she prepared to take the ACT and work towards attending a four-year college.

Socially, the arrangement made sense. Edwards and Przybylski were both in their mid-20s, so the youth they hosted was close enough to their age that they could comfortably hang out. But, as much as the youth treated them like friends at times, she approached them like humiliating parents at other times.

"I had never felt embarrassing before," Przybylski said with a laugh.

"I thought, 'I'm only 25, and I'm this person already!'" Edwards added.

The youth's efforts to get into college paid off that year. She was accepted to most of the seven schools she applied to.

Erica Phillips. Photo by Kate Sosin.

Challenges with HHP

According to Wade, most of the challenges that hosts and youth face in HHP are typical roommate problems.

"It's not just adults saying, 'Okay young people, get it together because your room is a mess, your laundry is a mess," Wade said. "We've had young people struggle with the adults being the one that leaves the dishes in the sink or doesn't sweep up."

In instances where young people and host volunteers are struggling, UCAN offers to step in and mediate. Host home staff or formerly homeless youth from the advisory board help both sides talk through issues happening in the home.

"It kind of flattens the hierarchy and puts the young person's voice at center," Wade said.

It also allows for flexibility not typically found in programs that house LGBTQ street-based youth, who often struggle with the transition from life on the streets to life in programs with strict rules about when they can come and go, eat and sleep.

Moreover, HHP is a long-term solution. Youth who receive services from UCAN can return at any time, even a decade later, and receive support.

But those advantages do not always resonate with funders, a problem that has sometimes stifled the program's growth.

HHP hosts just 10-15 youth a year, and number does not always wow foundations and government agencies offering grants.

"They want to see 50+ kids go through a shelter system," Wade said. "We were told by one foundation here in Chicago that they couldn't [fund us again]—not because our outcomes weren't phenomenal, because they were—but that we just didn't house as many people as the other shelter systems. However, if you break down the price points, you see what you get for the cost of a host home is a fourth of the cost of what you get from a shelter bed."

But that resistance to funding a small program also means HHP will struggle to support more than 10-15 youth in the future. This year, UCAN has more volunteers than it does funds. It costs approximately $14,000 to house a young person in HHP for a year, money that UCAN is still trying to raise so that HHP can house more than 10-15 young people.

Since housing a youth, Edwards has gone on to work for UCAN. That means she won't be able to house another young person through HHP for now. But she and Przybylski remain open to the possibility of hosting people in the future.

"Some friends of ours will talk about this program and say 'Wow, that's crazy. What an amazing program. What a radical idea,' said Edwards. "I think it's funny that such a simple idea—you have a room, someone needs a room, match—is radical. To me that seems like the easiest of all solutions… And if you don't do the dishes at night, no one's going to kick you out the next morning. Thank God, because I'm the one who doesn't do the dishes."

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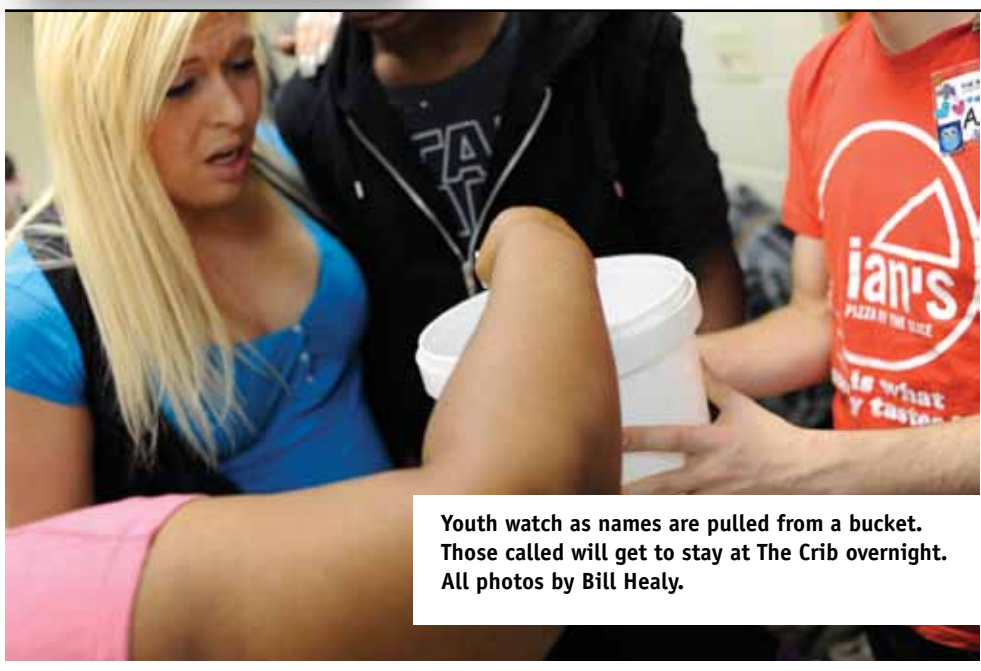
LGBTQ Youth Series from WINDY CITY TIMES



Youth watch as names are pulled from a bucket. Those called will get to stay at The Crib overnight. All photos by Bill Healy.

Young people hang out in the "big room" at The Crib.

The Crib creates safe haven for LGBTQ youth

BY ERICA DEMAREST

At 8:15 p.m. on a chilly Tuesday in late October, about a dozen young people gather in the Lakeview Lutheran Church parking lot. They joke and smoke cigarettes and hop from foot-to-foot, rubbing their hands together for warmth.

When volunteers open the church's side door at 8:30 p.m., the crowd has swelled to at least 30 people. One-by-one, youth file into a hallway, scribble their names on scraps of paper and drop the slips into a white plastic bucket.

For the next 15 minutes, these young people will await a lottery to determine who can spend the night at The Crib, The Night Ministry's LGBTQ-affirming shelter for 18 to 24 year olds. It has 20 beds.

"We originally tried to make it first-come, first served, but we ran into a problem really early on," coordinator Nate Metrick explains. "In the first couple weeks, there would be 25 or 30 people trying to get in at the same moment. They would wait across the street at the police station and then run across at 8:30, when we start admission. People would run in between cars; someone jumped over a car once. It's really impossible to tell who's first when 25 people show up at once.

"We tried to figure out what's fairest, and there really is no fair option," Metrick deadpans. "What we settled on is a lottery process."

If fewer than 20 people arrive by 8:45 p.m., each attendee is admitted. Tonight, there are nearly twice as many youth as there are beds.

Some young people sit and wring their hands, rocking slightly. Others pace, visibly nervous. Still others dance, laugh or play cards.

As a volunteer slowly pulls names from the bucket and checks them off a master sign-in sheet, several young people crowd around her, peering over her shoulder.

When the last name is called, some stomp and curse. One woman asks those who can couch-surf to give up their spots. And several young people willingly abdicate their beds—opting to spend the night with a significant other who didn't make the cut.

Those who aren't chosen are given a $2.50 bus card, but several youth say they don't have anywhere else to go.

Turn to page 13

A youth volunteer thumbs through a magazine.

A couple of young people sit and play cards.

A poster explains what the shelter means to those who stay there.

A youth volunteer explains the night's procedures.

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CRIB from page 12

"It's kind of hard because you have to sleep on the street," Logan, 24, says. "You have to go other places. You have to figure out what your next step is. If there were more spaces here, then it wouldn't be so hard to have a lottery. I know some people who have slept, literally, behind dumpsters for the night when there wasn't a place here… No one should get turned away."

The Chicago Coalition for the Homeless estimates that in 2011-2012, there were 10,995 unaccompanied homeless youth in Chicago. During that same timeframe, the group counted just 266 youth shelter beds.

Additionally, many LGBT people report harassment and violence in shelters. When The Crib opened two years ago, it set out to provide a safe, homey and LGBTQ-affirming environment.

About 75 percent of youth at The Crib identify as LGBTQ, says Jessica Howe, a spokesperson for The Night Ministry. Thirty percent identify as transgender; and one-third of the staff say they're transgender or gender non-conforming.

"I've stayed at other places before, and it's not safe for people like us—LGBTQ, I, A, whatever," says Kael, 22, who works part-time and turns to The Crib when he can't stay with friends. "I've been attacked in a shelter. I've been sexually harassed in some shelters. Here, I feel a little safer. I'm with my own people."

When asked to describe The Crib, youth used words such as "fun" or "supportive."

"They treat us with mad respects," Diamond, 24, says. She compares a night at The Crib to a kiki—referencing the cult Scissor Sisters song.

"A kiki is a party for calming all your nerves," the lyrics say. "We're spilling tea and dishing just desserts one may deserve. And though the sun is rising, few may choose to leave, so shade that lid and we'll all bid adieu to your ennui."

At 9 p.m., the 20 youth who will sleep at The Crib begin "gratitudes," a nightly session where people give thanks and share positive news. Common themes include friendship, The Crib and God.

Over the next three hours, youth will eat a nutritious dinner, play loud music, dance, study for the GED and paint each other's nails. Yoga classes, HIV/STI testing, massage and chiropractic sessions are offered several times a month, Howe says. And youth can always take showers and do laundry.

Plus, those who stay at The Crib can perform chores in exchange for one-day bus passes, and enroll in 2-month leadership training.

"I'm very grateful," says Don, 23, who attends school and has a job, but says day-to-day expenses make it tough to save for an apartment. He has a lot of friends at The Crib, but envisions a future where he has stable housing and comes back as a volunteer. Tonight, he says he would've slept on the Blue Line if he hadn't won a bed in the lottery.

"It's safer [than the Red Line]," he says. "Numerous times, I've fallen asleep there, and I've gotten robbed."

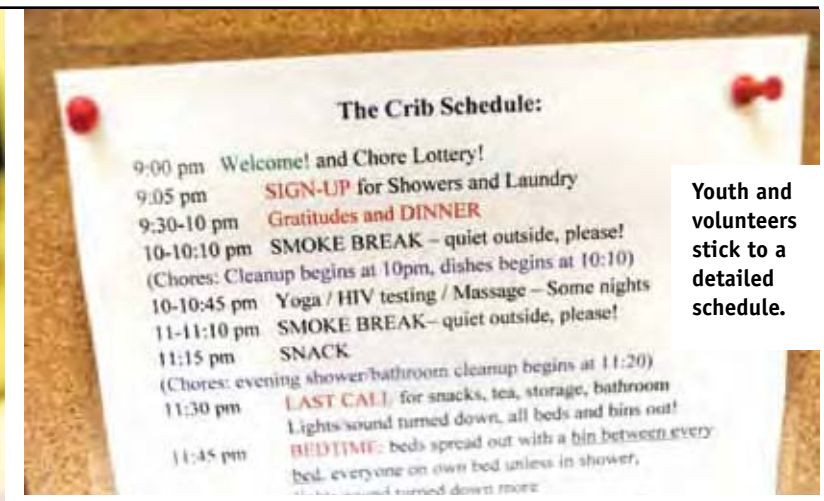
The Crib serves about 300 youth per year, with a monthly operating cost of $37,000, Howe says. This figure includes meals, safe shelter, recreational programming, case management and referrals for support services.

In the morning, young people are served a hearty breakfast, and everyone is out the door by 9 a.m.

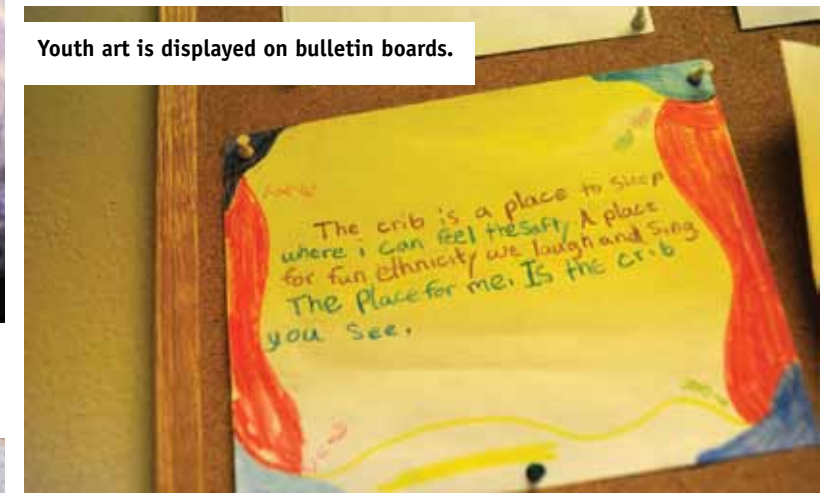
Though the majority of youth interviewed said they were grateful for The Crib—citing how positive and safe it is compared to other shelters—many are concerned about the limited number of beds.

"It's sometimes scary," Patricia, 19, says. "The winter is one of our biggest fears. Last year, there was a blizzard, and it was horrible."

Nate Metrick, coordinator of The Crib, arrived for work on Oct. 30 in costume.



Youth and volunteers stick to a detailed schedule.



Youth art is displayed on bulletin boards.

Names are pulled and read during The Crib's lottery. Those who aren't chosen receive $2.50 bus cards.

next week in

GENERATION HALSTED

Learn more about Lakeview youth programs as we profile two local organizations: Center on Halsted and the Chicagoland Community Church (C3).

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Generation Halsted

is an eight-week series that seeks to capture youth voices not typically represented in Windy City Times and other media. The young people portrayed have many housing situations, gender identities and sexual orientations. The series looks primarily, but not exclusively, at Boystown, where an influx of young LGBTQ people has been a source of controversy. Windy City Times will continue to explore the issues raised here beyond this series.

Center on Halsted provides youth services, support but not without controversy

BY KATE SOSIN

Center on Halsted, lobby. Photos by Kate Sosin.

When Center on Halsted opened in 2007, it instantly became Chicago's most-recognizable LGBT institution, and many hailed it as a beacon of hope for future generations.

More than five years later, the Center offers a laundry list of youth programs and services from basic meals to cultural events to career counseling. Its services continue to grow, as the organization recently began offering youth programs seven days a week.

But like most large LGBT organizations, Center on Halsted has come under scrutiny, especially when it comes to youth.

A look at the Center's youth services

The Center's 990 tax form for 2011 shows that in terms of program funding, youth services are the Center's first priority. Last year, the Center reported that its youth program was its largest, funded at $885,219. HIV/AIDS services followed at $712,245, and cultural programs accounted for $518,651. A 2013 projection provided by the Center budgets more than a million dollars for youth services.

On most weekdays, youth ages 18-24 can attend the Center's breakfast program, which provides meals and programming Monday through Thursday. Young people can also visit the Center for counseling services, STD/ HIV prevention programs, sex education, access to computers, job readiness support and after school programs like art classes and sports. Youth have access to open gym hours at the Center, movies, leadership training and other events. The Center hosts a ten-week spoken word apprenticeship for youth in partnership with After School Matters called "Youth Speak OUT." A program called "Street Law" educates young people on legal issues such as signing an apartment lease, rights that youth have when applying for college, and employment discrimination.

On weekends, the Center partners with About Face Theatre for programs, and it also offers a Saturday cinema event, among other things.

Tim'm West, associate director of youth programs, said that when people talk about "youth" at the Center, they are usually referring to street-based youth. But the Center serves young people ages 13-24 from all walks of life.

"We have a very broad population here at the Center on Halsted," West said. "So it's not just all street-based youth… Certainly, they are a population that has more urgent immediate needs around homeless and sometimes healthcare and different things like that. A lot of those youth don't live in this neighborhood. They come from other areas of town where they don't feel as safe to be LGBTQ and open."

West notes that the wide age range often means the Center's youth program serves three populations—ranging from youth in their early teens to those approaching their mid-20s.

Each week, staffers in the youth program post a new schedule of events on the youth space door. The colorful calendar lists the week's activities, noting when age restrictions apply, and it lists special events happening at the Center.

Despite a growing number of youth programs, West still has ideas for improvement. He notes that vocational training for queer youth is rarely offered in creative fields, something he is currently working to change.

"A lot of queer youth are good at music or dance or visual art," West said. "Why are we always talking about the normative professions when we talk about vocation?"

Past complaints from youth

Many youth have expressed discontent with the Center over the years.

In the past, youth alleged that Center staff made them enter the building through a side door, to keep them out of view of the public. In an April 2011 interview, Center CEO Modesto "Tico" Valle said the side entrance had originally been designed to give youth privacy when entering the building, but the Center had to stop using the door over the negative perception it generated.

"We don't want people to feel like they're second-class citizens," Valle said in April.

Other youth have complained that the Center is too strict, calling police and banning them for minor offenses.

The Center has navigated disapproval from both sides, however. Residents have complained that the organization attracts problematic youth who commit crimes and harass residents.

Those two conflicting viewpoints have often placed the Center in a tricky position when it comes to youth.

Youth speak about the Center

In August, Windy City Times reporters began a three-month survey of LGBTQ youth, primarily in Lakeview (the results from that survey were published on Nov. 14 in Windy City Times and are available online). In that survey, youth were asked to identify what LGBTQ services, if any, they accessed.

A surprisingly high number of young people reported, unsolicited, that they had been banned from Center on Halsted at some point. Many said they believed they were still banned. Others said they refused to use services at the Center because of negative experiences.

West, who has worked at the Center since June, acknowledged that reputation. But he feels that view is sometimes propagated by youth who have committed more serious offenses than they are willing to admit.

Several youth told Windy City Times reporters that they had been banned for seemingly minor offenses. Several said they were kicked out for falling asleep at the Center.

"That's never happened," West said, when asked about reports from youth. "It's never something as soft as someone falling asleep."

West said the Center has been working on changing the culture that may have contributed to that perception—moving toward one that celebrates youth rather than viewing them as problems in the community.

Earlier this year, the Center announced the implementation of restorative justice practices in place of banning.

Restorative justice is an approach to handling supposed wrongdoing that aims to provide alternatives to punishment. It looks at the experiences of people involved and attempts to heal those afflicted rather than discipline an alleged wrongdoer.

At the Center, young people are now "suspended" instead of "banned," and they are allowed to re-enter the Center after completing a mediation process. (This process has been a source of debate between Center staff and some community activists, who argue that the Center's process is out of step with the spirit of restorative justice principles).

So far, West said, the new process has been successful, allowing many people who thought they were banned for years to re-enter the building.

"A lot of the young people who have been suspended are in the Center now doing great things," said West, adding that some youth who had been banned before recently received the Center's monthly "Youth Excellence Award."

The Center also has a grievance process, West noted. Young people can file complaints about Center staff and return them to either West or the reception desk.

One who remains unconvinced is Omari, a 23-year-old bisexual-identified youth. Despite the new mediation process, Omari has been banned from the Center for about two years, he said.

"They get funding for youth, they take the money, and then they ban the youth," he said.

"So you have people sponsoring the Center for youth programs, and the programs are not being used because all the youth are getting banned and kicked out … that's setting them up to cause destructions or sit on people's porches."

Omari sees the relationship between youth providers and youth as co-dependent. Young people need Lakeview organizations for services, he said. But those organizations need youth to get funding for their programs, too.

"The sponsors don't see this," he said. "The sponsors don't come talk to us. They just give money because we ain't nothing but a tax write-off to them."

Omari was initially banned for pepper-spraying another youth who he alleges was trying to attack him. He now spends his time at Broadway Youth Center and the library, he said. He also stays at The Crib, The Night Ministry's LGBTQ-friendly youth shelter.

Omari is not alone in his anger towards the Center.

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"The Center is a bunch of bullshit," one young transgender woman bluntly stated in the survey. She said she feels that some Center staffers are out of touch with the needs of homeless youth in the area. Still, she frequents the Center.

Windy City Times reporters estimate that the majority of the more than 100 street-based youth interviewed or surveyed for the series volunteered that they had been banned at least once from the Center.

Very few youth stated that they had been banned from The Crib or Broadway Youth Center. Because the survey did not specifically ask each youth about their feelings about Center on Halsted, it is impossible to state what percentage of those surveyed have actually been banned. For the same reason, the surveys did not capture youth who do feel positively about the Center, its programs and staff.

West estimates that less than one percent of the Center's youth population is banned.

"We see about 1,000 youth over the course of a year, and obviously I think there's about ten [suspended]."

West also noted that people of all ages, and not just youth, can be suspended.

According to West, part of the challenge has been getting the word out to people banned from the Center under old rules. Some youth were banned years ago by staff who have long since left the organization, and those banned may not even know they can seek mediation.

Three Windy City Times reporters interviewed West and former Center on Halsted spokesperson Brian Richardson over the course of two days (Richardson recently left his position at the Center to work at the Chicago Department of Public Health).

At the conclusion of the first interview, as reporters were about to leave the building, two Center security guards came down the stairs with a transgender youth in tow.

Reporters saw that the young person was wearing handcuffs. (The youth later told reporters that they identified as transgender but did not provide a preferred pronoun. As such, this article uses the gender-neutral pronoun "they").

Security guards led the young person through the Center/ Whole Foods lobby, where patrons sat watching. Guards brought the youth to a room behind the Center's reception desk area.

Within moments, several young people crowded the reception desk, asking why the trans youth had been detained. Three different young people told Windy City Times that they had watched the youth get handcuffed but that no confrontation had taken place prior.

Staff members indicated that the youth had been handcuffed and detained because they violated their ban from the Center.

Thirty minutes later, this reporter tracked down the trans youth, who had been let go by guards.

The youth, 17, expressed hesitancy about speaking on-record, and has therefore not been named.

"I forgot that I was banned," the youth claimed.

According to the youth, guards approached them and asked if they were allowed to be at the Center. Guards then handcuffed the youth and took them into an office behind the reception area where they looked the youth up on a computer system. The youth was released from the Center's custody shortly after and was allowed to leave the building.

The youth has been banned since June, they said. But they had been to the Center since that time without incident. Asked if they were nervous about being handcuffed, they said they were not because they did not feel they had done anything wrong.

Richardson, who also witnessed the handcuffing incident, said it is rare for the Center guards to handcuff visitors.

West echoed that sentiment during a follow-up interview the next day. According to West, security guards usually only detain Center patrons for arrestable offences, such as trespassing.

"One of the reasons we do it is to protect [the youth]. For example, that youth yesterday was allowed to go just under the promise that they would avoid the Center. Because if police get involved, and they are trespassing, they could actually get arrested and taken to jail. So when youth are serving suspension, for their own protection, we advise them like, 'Just stay away and honor the suspension period so that you don't put yourself in a worse situation.'"

In the case of the trans youth who was handcuffed, West said, "That particular youth had been suspended multiple times for fighting, like for hurting people."

West said he has only seen one or two instances of the Center detaining people. Unlike the incident with the trans youth, who was detained but almost immediately let go, West stated that security detains people when the Center has called police to come make an arrest

Still, Center on Halsted contracts with a security firm that hires off-duty police officers, a position that sometimes appears to confuse the line between the Center's security team and police.

Many youth, even those banned, regularly gather on the sidewalk next to the Center along Waveland Avenue and smoke or chat. On most days, a Center security guard stands next to the Whole Foods parking garage, dispersing crowds that block the sidewalk.

Asked to define the perimeters of his jurisdiction when working for the Center, one officer stated that the Center's boundaries stop at the end of the building. But his jurisdiction, he said, is the whole city because he is a Chicago Police officer. As such, he can tell the youth to disperse no matter where they are on the sidewalk.

Tim'm West, associate director of youth programs at the Center on Halsted. Photo by Kate Sosin.

Security, licensing at Center

BY BILL HEALY

Center on Halsted hires its armed guards through Walsh Security, a private company that employs off-duty policemen and other law enforcement. The owner of the company is a Chicago Police officer, Tom Walsh.

As a policeman, Walsh doesn't need a license to guard the Center himself. His police credentials cover that. But because he contracts on behalf of other officers to provide services at the Center, Walsh is required by state law to have a license.

He does not have one.

In other words, Walsh and the Center on Halsted appear to be circumventing state law while strictly enforcing it.

"If he's hiring people to do security work and sending them out to jobs, he needs a license," said Sue Hofer, a spokesperson for the Illinois Department of Professional Regulation. "We have no record of any security license for Walsh or Walsh Security."

Licenses are important because they allow the state to set standards and ensure proper training. When applying to become a private security contractor, licensees must undergo fingerprinting and FBI background checks that are sent to all 50 states.

In October, the most recent month for which data was available, non-compliant nurses, barbers, doctors, massage therapists, roofing contractors and veterinarians were disciplined by the state. One private security contractor, for instance, had a license suspended for not paying child support.

In October, Brian Richardson, then-spokesman for Center on Halsted, said: "We contract out with Walsh [Security]. We pay them a set amount. Part of the contract includes details of where that money goes, how it's being used and what services we get. But that [contract or license] we just won't be able to share with you."

In recent days, Windy City Times emailed Center on Halsted CEO Modesto "Tico" Valle and Officer Walsh a list of questions seeking clarification. Among the questions was how the Center pays its guards – individually or through Walsh Security.

Neither Walsh nor the Center have commented, despite repeated requests. Walsh offered to meet, but did not follow up with plans.

This reporter spoke with Walsh at the dedication of the Halsted Street Legacy Walk in October, and he assured me that he had the proper paperwork in order. I followed up by phone a few weeks later to see if he'd looked into acquiring a license and he pointed me to the Secretary of State's website, which lists Walsh Security, LLC as a business.

Meanwhile, the website for the Illinois Department of Professional Regulations, which handles licenses, shows no record of Walsh or Walsh Security.

Center security guards frequently wear hats and sweatshirts that identify them as "Police." This appears to violate the Private Detective, Private Alarm, Private Security, Fingerprint Vendor, and Locksmith Act of 2004.

This Illinois state law stipulates that for private security contractors, "no license holder or employee of a licensed agency shall imply in any manner that the person is an employee or agent of a governmental entity." This includes displaying badges or wearing uniforms that use the words 'police', 'sheriff', 'highway patrol', 'trooper' or 'law enforcement.'

There is also a Chicago Police Department order that says police cannot work "when the secondary employer would require the Department member be represented as a Chicago Police Officer or wear the prescribed police uniform," unless written consent is provided by the Superintendent of Police.

Officer Jose Rios, the Chicago Police Department LGBT liaison, used to work for Walsh as a security guard at Center on Halsted. Rios stopped because he wanted his relationship with young people to be "clearly defined."

Rios said that by hiring off-duty police to work as security, the Center lowers the number of incidents referred to the police department.

He shared a story from one of his last days at the Center: An intoxicated young person became belligerent, knocking over chairs and swearing at people. Rios said a security guard who is also a policeman might be more discerning in this type of situation.

"Police officers are gonna be like, 'Look, you could have these people arrested. [But instead] let's put them out for a day, let them calm down and cool off,'" he said.

GENERATION HALSTED

LGBTQ Youth Series from WINDY CITY TIMES

Colby Mowery (right) talks with Koala (left) and another attendee during a Sunday meal. Photo by Bill Healy.

Non-affirming church offers inviting space for youth

BY BILL HEALY

East Lakeview might be the last place you'd look for a Baptist missionary church, but on Aldine Street, just a few blocks west of Halsted, there's a 40-person congregation called C3. The Chicagoland Community Church, as it's known, is part of the Southern Baptist, or Great Commission, network of churches.

Pastor Jon Pennington is a loquacious man who moved to Chicago 12 years ago to start the church.

C3 is "not a church that is open and affirming," he says. But "we are a church that is open."

He means that while his church views homosexuality as a sin, every Sunday after its 4 pm service, the congregation offers a hot meal to anyone who wants to join. The dinner is part of the church's "Safe Haven" program, which caters primarily to young LGBT people.

"Hate the sin. Love the sinner," Pennington says. "We mean it and try to live it."

And so, on Sunday afternoons when the bars and restaurants on North Halsted are packed, a group of young people often waits outside the modest-looking church for worship services to wrap.

"We honestly and completely and totally love people who are in the LGBT community," Pennington says. "And we say that without flinching. I loathe the fact that some Christians try to use this book [the Bible] as a justification to scream hate and to come by with horrible signs that the scriptures don't even say. That absolutely nauseates me. Though there's a problem with the other extreme. When people just put a rainbow on the church, they're ignoring a good portion of the scriptures. And once you start bringing your scissors to the text, that's never gonna stop."

Neighbors have chided Pennington for attracting "that element," meaning young people, to their part of the neighborhood. But he insists on not only hosting the weekly meal, but also making sure young people feel at home there. Guests at C3 are welcome to sleep if they're tired—something that's often banned at other service centers. And the church opens its closets too, giving away jeans, hooded sweatshirts, socks and underwear.

Dee Heldenbrand cooks Sunday meals. She prepares for 50 people but says the church usually only gets 25-30. Some weeks she'll make chicken and rice. Others it's macaroni and cheese or spaghetti and meatballs.

"They eat until they're full," she says.

Church member Colby Mowery, 21, runs the

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One young person leaps for the camera after a Sunday dinner at C3. Photo by Kate Sosin.

GENERATION HALSTED

LGBTQ Youth Series from WINDY CITY TIMES

CHURCH from page 12

"Safe Haven" program. He says it's a time when young people can get off the street, grab a bite to eat, share in some conversation or sit alone if that's what they need. The church has instruments that it lets young people use. (The opening video in this series includes an original piano composition played by a young person during one of the weekly dinners.)

"We are not anti-gay. We are pro-Jesus," Mowery says. "Our purpose is not that we are against anyone."

Mowery says a few people have sought his counsel when thinking through their sexuality. When they do this, Mowery says the most important thing he can do is be a good listener. And when people ask for guidance, Mowery points toward passages in the bible that he believes indicate homosexual behavior is a sin.

But, he says, many of the youth have lives that are complicated, and their sexuality is often tied up in family and support systems. Many mention some kind of rupture with their families.

"A lot of people put on masks and say, 'I hate my parents,'" Mowery says, "but really when you get through that, they say: I wish that I knew what my brother does every day. I wish I could go to his football games.

"They've grown up very fast. They've been exposed to everything – drugs, sex, alcohol – very quickly and with no one to explain it to them. No one ever had any types of birds and bees conversation with them. No one ever told them what alcohol was. They learn these things on their own. And so, because of that, they became adults really fast. And because of that you've got them exposed to a lot of things without a lot of education.

"And I think that, mixed with a lot of hurt from their parents rejecting them, causes a different culture to happen. And they are their own culture."

Mowery says many of the young LGBT people he sees often choose new names for themselves.

"That's one thing where they can take back the reigns of their destiny," he says. They think, "'I don't care what other people think about me.' And that's why sometimes other people in the neighborhoods get frustrated, because the street kids are acting crazy in a place where its not okay to be crazy. There's less of a sense of: It's okay to drink in a bar but it's not okay to drink in a church. There's not that same compartmentalization."

Mowery says a lot of the young people he encounters are disillusioned by how they are received in Boystown and feel isolated. "What they need is for someone to say: You do matter. I see you, and I'm willing to listen to you. And you are important."

That's a role C3 is happy to fill.

Drakera, 20, eats spaghetti and meatballs at Safe Haven. Photo by Kate Sosin.

C3 Pastor Jon Pennington. Photo by Bill Healy.

Many youth skip Sunday services, biding their time outside until Safe Haven begins. Here, Safaria, 20, and Kasmiere, 19, joke with friends.
Photo by Erica Demarest.

Koala (right) talks music with a C3 volunteer. Photo by Kate Sosin.

Koala, 18, plays piano inside C3. During Sunday dinners, youth regularly take turns playing the church's instruments.
Photo by Bill Healy.

Colby Mowery rifles through C3's closet. The church gives free clothing to youth, sometimes setting aside items that particular young people have requested.
Photo by Bill Healy.

People line up for Sunday's Safe Haven dinner, which is cooked by church volunteers.
Photo by Bill Healy.

next week in

GENERATION HALSTED

Windy City Times will explore the criminalization of young people.

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LGBTQ Youth Series from WINDY CITY TIMES

Generation Halsted

is an eight-week series that seeks to capture youth voices not typically represented in Windy City Times and other media. The young people portrayed have many housing situations, gender identities and sexual orientations. The series looks primarily, but not exclusively, at Boystown, where an influx of young LGBTQ people has been a source of controversy. Windy City Times will continue to explore the issues raised here beyond this series.

Vulnerable LGBT youth have limited options for justice

BY BILL HEALY

Young people under 24 were arrested 429 times in Boystown between March and October this year, according to the Chicago Police Department. Young people complain frequently about the lack of respect they are shown by police. And those complaints sometimes include treatment that is violent, said Lisa Gilmore, director of education and victim advocacy at Center on Halsted. But young people who want to address their grievances face many obstacles.

Gilmore shared the story of a young transgender person who was stopped by police outside a convenience store in Lakeview. One officer ran a baton around the young person's skirt and started to lift it up, asking what genitalia the youth had underneath.

"That's not okay," Gilmore said. "That is sexual violence."

Those who don't like the way they are treated by police should file a formal complaint with the police department, said Officer Joe Rios, LGBT liaison for the Chicago Police Department (CPD).

"We as an organization, CPD, are committed to treating everybody fairly," Rios said. "That's the ultimate goal. Everybody should be treated with respect."

Joey Mogul, a civil rights attorney with the People's Law Office, encouraged young people who want to file a complaint to contact a lawyer first. Lawyers can help youth decide the best route for registering complaints, which often depends on whether there is a criminal case pending.

"Anything they say can be used against them," Mogul said.

The Independent Police Review Authority (IPRA) is responsible for investigating police misconduct alongside the police's own internal affairs. In May, The Chicago Reporter found that 91 percent of complaints lodged against police with IPRA were dropped because the person making the complaint did not swear to the truthfulness of the allegation.

But Mogul said IPRA has the discretion to decide when police are required to swear to the truthfulness of their allegations. In more serious cases, Mogul said, the IPRA will ask police for such information.

"But I can tell you in many excessive force cases, that's not happening," Mogul added.

The Young Women's Empowerment Project (YWEP) collects data about "bad encounters" with police and other institutions by hand, online and by phone. YWEP is a youth-led project for girls, including transgender youth, who have experience in the sex trade or street economies.

In May 2012, YWEP released a report that described 146 "bad encounters" it had documented since September 2009. The most frequent complaint was a refusal to help. And the vast majority of negative encounters came from the Lakeview and Englewood neighborhoods. Health care institutions ran a close second to police as a source of "bad encounters" for youth.

YWEP director Dominique McKinney believes the 146 documented encounters don't accurately represent every instance of misconduct.

"Young people may not want to retell the story or may fear writing it down could lead to trouble somehow," the YWEP report states. "When challenging large systems like the police in Chicago, young people don't feel like a report gives them a fair chance to fight the misconduct with any hope that justice will take place or that officers will be held accountable."

"Institutions need to realize that they will be held accountable by young people," McKinney said. "If we don't do it, who is gonna do it? And who best to do it, but us?"

Chicago Police arrests in Boystown, people ages 12-24
(for the period covering March 4 - October 15, listed by crime)

Robbery	20
Aggravated assault	2
Aggravated battery	6
Burglary	6
Larceny-theft	66
Motor vehicle theft	3
Simple assault	11
Simple battery	53
Vandalism	14
Weapons violation	7
Prostitution	3
Sex Crime - Criminal sexual abuse	8
Narcotics violation	70
DUI	7
Liquor law violation	2
Disorderly conduct	42
Miscellaneous non-indexed offense	37
Municipal code violation	27
Traffic violation	7
Warrant arrest	38

Notes: Police districts 19 and 23 combined on March 4; Boystown is defined here as Grace Street to the north, Wellington Avenue to the south, Sheffield Avenue to the west, Lake Shore Drive to the east. Source: Chicago Police Department.

Photos by Kate Sosin.

GENERATION HALSTED

LGBTQ Youth Series from WINDY CITY TIMES

Chanel Winn DeCarlo

28 years old
Auburn-Gresham

BY BILL HEALY

Chanel Winn DeCarlo is 28 years old and lives in Auburn Gresham. Though the Generation Halsted series focuses primarily on young people, Windy City Times included DeCarlo's story because she reflects on her own youth and experiences with the criminal justice system.

DeCarlo came out as transgender at 16. Her family is supportive, and she holds an Associate's Degree from a local college. DeCarlo occasionally engages in sex work; she says she has an online following and quite a few regulars.

WCT interviewed DeCarlo late one night in September. Excerpts are highlighted here; the full audio interview is available on our website. Reporters gave DeCarlo $20 in Walgreens gift cards for her time, a rarity in journalism that was intended as a gesture of solidarity.

Chanel Winn DeCarlo. Photos by Bill Healy.

Windy City Times: Can you tell us a little about yourself?

Chanel Winn DeCarlo: I didn't always look as good as I do now. I've had quite a bit of surgery done. And I got into a lifestyle where you either have to be born with money or you just end up having to do stuff.

I've had $60,000 worth of plastic surgery done, and I'm still not done. I never would have made it. And plus while I was in school, I was having trouble just buying my books. Because my parents made too much money for me to get help but not enough money to really put me through school. So I got into adult work. It's not something I wanted. It's just…

My parents support me. But, you know, they're always just worried about my safety or the stuff I have to go through.

I started taking my hormones at 16. But then when I was 17 I stopped, and I tried doing that for a year. And it was just so uncomfortable. I don't even know how to explain it. It was like a rash to me. Everything was just so foreign. I just could not relate to living as a male at all. And it was just so inherently me that there was no coming out actually. Everybody who always knew me, the people I grew up with, they were like: We couldn't quite put our finger on it. But we knew something was different about you. Nothing's changed except for the way you look. You know? It's still you!

WCT: Do you ever hang out in Boystown/ Lakeview?

CWD: Every time I go up there, I go to jail. I have over 60 cases. I went to the penitentiary cause of all the cases I caught up there. I used to live up there too. I mean, the police. They used to take me to jail with my groceries. I'm like: I'm going to the grocery store. You know what? Over here [in Auburn Gresham], if you just mind your business, just leave everybody alone, nobody bothers you.

WCT: When did you realize you were different?

CWD: I think when I was around 14, that's when I figured out I was different from the other girls. They almost sent me to a Catholic high school. And I was definitely dead set against that. Cause I was not going to an all boys school, cause like I didn't want to take gym. It was just weird because they always wanted you to do stuff. And I'm like: That doesn't interest me. They wanted me to do sports and were trying to get me ready for the priesthood. And I was like: I'm not interested in none of that. And I didn't quite understand it either at that time. I just knew. I knew I wasn't quite like the boys and I knew I wasn't quite like the girls. But I identified more with the girls than the boys.

WCT: Were there any movies or music you heard growing up that had someone trans in them?

CWD: No. The first thing I ever saw was Jenny Jones, Maury Povich or something. When they had some girls on there. It kinda registered a little bit. But then they were always so extreme. I was like: I'm not quite like that.

But then I had a word for it. And so I started doing research at the library.

WCT: What are some of the misconceptions people have about trans women?

CWD: That we're over-sexualized. That we do this to have sex with men.

They don't like the overtness of it all, the kids around here. Even some of the guys who mess around, they don't like the overtness of it all. If you just go about your business, some people might laugh, but most people pay you no mind.

They see you and don't see you. Especially if they don't want to even be bothered. It's like: I don't even see you. You're not there.

Especially over here a lot of these guys are looking for transsexuals. They always pretend like they don't know. "Oh, my God, you fooled me! Okay, I'm gonna try something new."

You know what? Whenever I have contact with the police, the law or the court. Whatever they say, I don't say nothing. If they stop me, I just get in the car and just shut up. Give them my name and just go. I have nothing to say. Even when you go to court, it's like. You know my ID says female. But the judge, she's like: "Sir this… But you used to be known as…" That does not matter. This is who I am now. So they already have a stinking-ass attitude. And it's just like: Whatever they say. What do I need to do to get you outta my face?

WCT: How does that make you feel?

CWD: It really pisses me off. I feel like I have no control. Like when [the police] just pulled over here, I was like: Oh God. Here we go.

WCT: What are some of the positive aspects to being trans?

CWD: As much as I've gone through and as much as I've had to deal with, I still wouldn't change anything about my life. Cause I'm a real compassionate person, and that comes from knowing what I know. Even them with drugs, I don't condone all that stuff. They know how I am. But you know what? I still have my parents. A lot of them girls get thrown out. My family has never turned against me. So maybe I would be on drugs if I didn't have a place to stay, didn't have family. A couple of my friends who died, I was the contact. Their families were like: They've been dead to us for the longest time anyway. They die and go to a pauper's grave. Nobody claims their body. Nobody even cares. It makes you feel so disposable, like you're not even a real person.

WCT: You said you don't want to change anything about who you are.

CWD: No. Cause I would be a totally different person, and I probably would be one of those people I don't like: Narrow-minded people who don't know anything, who think that you choose to be gay or I choose to be trans. Yeah! Cause I really wanted this!?

So just from an enlightened aspect – that I'm able to see – I don't know why you're doing what you're doing but I can still respect you as a human. There's a reason for everything even if we don't know why we're doing what we're doing.

And even with everything I go through – there are still miracles in my life. I still have my family. I still have my health. I believe that God cares for me. Everything that I go through, I just try to look at this like: "Okay, what am I supposed to be learning?" so I can pass this test and get past this.

WCT: Are you hopeful for the future?

CWD: I don't think my life will be much different than it is now.

WCT: Do you want it to be?

CWD: I do, but it's like: I'm almost 30 with no work history. And then - even with my ID changed now, which was done two years ago, it's like: "You just popped up out of nowhere? Who are you?"

I don't know how much better my life could be: If it was I wouldn't even know where to begin or how to start. With the police now, and that record. It's like: They tell you don't do something. But then they don't give you the opportunities to do anything. Then you get stuck in a hole, then you get stuck in a cycle.

I just don't like police. You know: I understand you're doing your job. If you catch me, you catch me. Do your job but don't overdo your damn job. Treat me with some fucking respect.

WCT: Are there some police officers who have treated you with respect?

CWD: Very few, but yeah.

WCT: Can you describe any positive encounters?

CWD: When I got robbed or when I got raped that time, one lady officer gave me some information about some counseling and stuff.

I just pretend like stuff doesn't happen. Even my friends who died, it's like: Forget about it. I've always had to do that.

WCT: Does that work or does it come out in crazy ways?

CWD: It'll come out in crazy ways. That's probably me acting out. Sometimes I'll just get so bored and it gets to the point where I'll trash my house. And it'll be over the littlest thing. But I figure that's probably from some of the stuff I don't deal with.

I guess I just got into the feeling that people don't care. Even my family.

My family does so much for me. I think that my family…I feel like everybody tolerates me. (laughs) We don't even speak about it no more. I guess that's where I learned everything from. My mother just says she has 2 daughters. She's like: That's a girl. Forget it. And she actually took all my boy pictures down. I think that's just their way of coping. Because they knew I wasn't gonna change. Like when I tried to do that year thing [going off hormones], I was getting really suicidal and I had two attempts. And my mother just said I'd a rather have a live daughter than a dead son.

GENERATION HALSTED

LGBTQ Youth Series from WINDY CITY TIMES

Walking while trans in Chicago

BY KATE SOSIN

Nomi Michaels Devereaux had six bags of groceries in hand when police arrested her.

She had just come from the Jewel Osco grocery store in Lakeview and was waiting outside while her boyfriend picked up a game system from a friend's on Sheffield.

According to Devereaux, police walked up to her, removed the groceries from her hands and handcuffed her.

"I said, 'What is going on? Why did you stop me? What is going on?'" she recalled.

At the police station, she said, officers made her take her bra off in front of them and then mocked her. She later learned she had been picked up for solicitation, she said.

Devereaux's story set off a firestorm in Lakeview because she did something few transgender people do: She reported the incident to local LGBT advocates. This August, that effort led to the implementation of a transgender general order for Chicago Police. "

Among other things, the order mandates that transgender people not be subjected to more frequent or invasive searches than other detainees. It also says that a transgender person's identity should not be taken as evidence of a supposed crime.

Stories about police wrongly assuming that transgender women are engaged in illegal sex work are so common in the U.S. that the phenomenon has simply become known as "walking while trans."

In a 2011 national survey of transgender people conducted by the National Center for Transgender Equality and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, 29 percent of participants reported that they had been harassed or disrespected by police. Twenty percent said they had been denied equal treatment, and six percent reported that police had physically assaulted them.

In August, an Illinois transgender woman was awarded a $10,000 settlement from the town of Cicero after she filed a complaint alleging that police incorrectly profiled her as a sex worker, threatened her and refused to use her legal name. (Although Cicero settled the case, the town denies any wrongdoing).

Such stories are also common in Chicago, but transgender advocates have noted the difficulty in recording incidents. The Chicago Police Department has not historically tracked transgender arrests, a reality expected to change with the introduction of the new ordinance. Further, transgender people often distrust police and other officials, making them less likely to report incidents.

Some transgender and gender non-conforming young people interviewed and surveyed for the "Generation Halsted" series reported being wrongly targeted by police for doing illegal sex work. Others reported that police ignore transgender people trying to report a crime.

"Yesterday, I was having a problem with a guy, and I flagged the police down in the middle of the street," said one trans woman in Auburn Gresham, in a survey conducted by Windy City Times this fall. "They kept driving."

Teen Living Programs serves homeless youth on South Side

BY JAMIE ANNE ROYCE

Sometimes it's just a snack or a shower. Other times it's a place to stay for the night or a free visit with a clinician. But no matter the circumstance, Teen Living Programs (TLP) serves homeless and precariously housed youth, particularly on the Southside.

When a group of Chicago social workers noticed homeless youth were living in the street, they formed TLP 36 years ago. Originally based on the North Side, TLP served many young people who were triaged out of the Department and Family Services or had aged out of the foster care system. In the 1990s, TLP moved its services to the Bronzeville neighborhood.

The outreach team is the first line of defense for TLP. Peer educators — paid interns who have experienced homelessness — work in conjunction with the outreach team, visiting areas where the youth congregate to offer them basics like a snack or safe sex kit. The ultimate goal of the team is to foster trust with the youth and get those without a place to stay into safe and stable housing.

"We work by being positive adult allies to the youth," said Jeri Lynch Linas, executive director of TLP.

TLP operates several residential programs, including a shelter for minors, a short-term transitional living program and a subsidized independent living program. Residents are placed by gender into female-identified and male-identified categories.

Each housing program comes with support services that vary from basic medical and psychiatric care to assistance in continuing education to finding employment.

"Young people, as they come in, have had their educations interrupted by experiencing the trauma of homelessness," Lynch Linas said, "so we work on getting them back in school."

Approximately 30 percent of the youth are LGBT, Lynch Linas estimates, touting the need for culturally competent services to foster a sense of trust and safety with the youth.

Jeri Lynch Linas (center) with two Teen Living Programs (TLP) youth. Photo courtesy of TLP.

"The ultimate goal of the youth homeless programs is to prevent adult homelessness," Lynch Linas said. "The idea is, if we intervene at a young age, we can help them make positive choices into adulthood. Not all models work for everyone, so we have to think of new services and multiple points of entry for services to best serve the youth."

But Lynch Linas does not think society has a concrete solution for ending homelessness, yet.

"The reality is, most of what we do as service providers is react," Lynch Linas said. "All the services [we offer] are a reaction to those already experiencing homelessness. How do we address the fact that these young people are homeless because of poverty, because of in adequate housing, because of domestic violence, because of substance abuse? … There is a huge bigger picture to all of this, and we need to figure out if our society has the capacity and the will to address the bigger picture."

next week in GENERATION HALSTED

WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU!

Next week is the eighth and final installment of "Generation Halsted," and we want to include you. If you've read the stories in the paper, watched the videos online or listened to us on the radio, now is the time to tell us what you think.

Email editor@windycitymediagroup.com with comments by Friday, December 28, at 5 p.m. to be included in the final part of the series.
You can still email comments after Dec. 28, for possible inclusion in future editions.

What have you learned? What would you like to see and hear as we move forward reporting on these topics?

You can also tweet us @windycitytimes1 or find us on Facebook and leave a comment there.
We look forward to hearing your thoughts!

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Kasmiere and Safaria:
Chosen family, chosen support

BY KATE SOSIN

Kasmiere knows that she has to be present for her gay daughter no matter how tired she is. It's something her own mother taught her.

"She'll force me to pick up the phone like it's my real child," Kasmiere says. "She'll say, 'Nuh-uh, I didn't do that to you, say like I'm hungry, I'm tired, I just got off work.'"

Kasmiere also feels that responsibility. Safaria, 20, is her chosen gay daughter, a common relationship between LGBTQ young people and their mentors or closest peers. In reality, the two are nearly the same age, and they're best friends. They're also transgender.

The two met by chance a little over a year ago in Lakeview. Safaria was just starting to deal with her sexual orientation and gender identity when she spotted Kasmiere along Halsted Street.

"I said, 'Hey girl, dang, what's your tease?'" Safaria recalls. "And she said, 'Girl, I love your hair.' And I think, 'Oh girl, thank you.'"

The two were fast friends. Three weeks after that first meeting, Kasmiere told Safaria she wanted Safaria to be her gay child. Safaria said she wanted Kasmiere to be her gay mother in return.

They talk a lot about what they call life's most important things: clothes, shoes, jewelry and boys. They take turns reciting that list over and over, each giggling as they talk over each other. As is often the case, the pair finishes each other's sentences.

In a half empty church parking lot, Kasmiere helps Safaria change clothing and gender presentations. She arrived in baggy jeans, a sweatshirt and a baseball cap. Underneath it, she sports a leopard print one-piece. A short brown wig arrives from out of a book bag. A red velvet dress will also make an appearance. Safaria poses for a journalist's camera in each outfit, seemingly celebrating each different expression. She likes to have her picture taken, she says.

Safaria's biological mother doesn't accept her gender identity or sexual orientation, Safaria says. She still loves her mother, she notes, but having a gay mother gives her a different support system.

Last year, Safaria was almost mugged in Boystown, but Kasmiere came to her aid.

"She was coming down the street," Safaria remembers. "She was like, 'Nuh-uh, you all leave my daughter alone!'"

"I remember that," Kasmiere says. "That was so long ago."

It was a defining moment for Kasmiere.

"When you say you're someone's gay mom, you don't really know how much you care for that person until you see that person in trouble. Then, it's like momma bear," Kasmiere says. "I was so surprised, how immature my modes (sic) is sometimes. I was really responsible."

Kasmiere recognizes that not many people will understand her relationship with Safaria. A gay mom is not exactly a friend or a mom, she says. Gay moms tell their gay kids to be safer or to stop drinking or doing drugs. But in the case of Safaria and Kasmiere, the two are also peers with equal footing.

Kasmiere describes that relationship in a way she does many things—she talks about jewelry. "You know how women is with diamonds?" she says. "Like they will do anything they is so obsessed with diamonds. That is how our relationship is. We is crazy over each other. We is best friends for life."

Kasmiere (left) and Safaria. Photos by Kate Sosin.

Youth builds new family in Lakeview

BY ERICA DEMAREST

When Ilene Cameron first visited Boystown four years ago, she was hoping to find acceptance. What she got was a family.

The then-18-year-old had been living in a group home following a litany of family issues.

"My [biological] family—they're not very accepting of the fact I'm bisexual," Cameron said. "They call me names, make fun of me, say a lot of things that I really don't like. My mom calls me a faggot. I'm downright dirty to have a relationship with a guy and a girl. I'm stupid, and I shouldn't be part of the family."

A good friend told Cameron about Boystown, the city's LGBT-designated corridor, and promised to show her around. Cameron soon met dozens of youth just like her. Many identified as LGBT; some were homeless or precariously housed; still others had been disowned after coming out to their families.

For the first time in years, Cameron felt at home.

"I always felt very alone," she said. "I was in middle school and high school, and nobody liked me because I would always try out for the boys' teams—football, basketball. They used to judge me, make fun of me, for how I dressed and everything. I had nobody I could depend on. I'd go home to my mom or my foster parents, and I'd still get judged."

Before she knew it, the lifelong South Sider had built a 'chosen family' in Lakeview—designating certain friends as siblings, aunties or parents.

"They've been with me through my rough ages—when I was drinking because I felt bad about my family. They helped me with a lot of things out here, took me into [their apartments] when I didn't have one… Out here, we're all respectful to each other. We count on one another. We don't argue that much. If someone gets hurt, we'll be at the hospital until they get better."

Cameron recalls hitting a rough patch about a year-and-a-half ago. She was just coming out of an abusive relationship and had suffered a miscarriage. Her health was poor, her asthma had been acting up, and though she has a GED, Cameron couldn't find work.

"Everybody came up with money so I could buy my inhaler, my iron pills and my vitamins," Cameron said. "They bought it for me and everything."

Cameron beams when talking about her chosen family, but says life can be tough in Lakeview.

"Mostly every night we have trouble with the police because some of the LGBTQ kids are homeless, and some of us don't really have bus fare to get on the trains," said Cameron, who lives in a West Side transitional housing program. "We help each other on trains—put our money together to buy bus fares."

She said police often stop her for no reason or harass young people near CTA stations, having made assumptions about whether the youth are riding legally.

It's also common, Cameron said, for Lakeview residents to make snide comments as they walk past her and her family.

"I just want [people] to know that we're all the same people," she said. "We might be a little bit different from you with our sexuality or whatever, but we're just the same. We go to school together. We're all in the same community. We ride the same bus, trains, everything. You shouldn't judge us for what we like, what we do or how we act."

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GENERATION HALSTED

LGBTQ Youth Series from WINDY CITY TIMES

"People even today can't fathom the idea that young people are homeless on the streets. It's just ridiculous to think it happens. That's why it's such a big issue... The idea—it's like aliens riding the Red Line."

— Nomi Michaels Devereaux, LGBTQ homeless youth advocate

Photo by Kate Sosin

Generation Halsted: Recommendations

Throughout the "Generation Halsted" series, many readers have asked how they can help LGBTQ street-based youth in Chicago.

The best answer might be for community members to pose that question to organizations already serving youth: The Night Ministry, Broadway Youth Center, UCAN's LGBTQ Host Home Program, Youth Lounge, Center on Halsted, Affinity Community Services, Taskforce Prevention and Community Services and others.

Based on our work throughout the series, here's what we suggest:

For the community

—Get to know Chicago's LGBT street-based youth

Over the last few years, conversations in Boystown have been ripe with assumptions about LGBT youth who access Lakeview services. But as much as people talk about youth, few seem to talk with them. Young people have ideas about how to improve their communities, and their voices should be amplified. Windy City Times found that LGBTQ youth in Lakeview were open and eager to share those ideas.

—Create opportunities for youth to shine

LGBTQ street-based young people are the Lakeview community's greatest underutilized resource. Most have a deep desire to contribute to and be needed by the community around them. Throughout the course of the "Generation Halsted" series, many young people shared with particular pride that they had internships with Lakeview Action Coalition. Others held leadership positions they earned through work with service organizations.

—Support the LGBTQ Host Home Program

Of all the services for LGBTQ youth in particular, Host Home Program is one of the only that focuses on long-term solutions to homelessness. Further, it is one of few programs for youth that does not institutionalize them, instead allowing the young people to make their own decisions and live as part of the community while they get back on their feet. Those who want to change the circumstances of street-based youth should consider hosting a young person. Those who cannot volunteer should consider donating money to UCAN.

—Support The Crib

The Night Ministry's youth shelter provides what most agree is the only safe nightly shelter for LGBTQ young people. Its services are crucial and unparalleled. Community members can contribute money, in-kind donations and volunteer hours to support it.

Those looking for other meaningful ways to engage and celebrate LGBTQ youth should talk with organizations that already serve youth, such as Broadway Youth Center, The Night Ministry and UCAN's LGBTQ Host Home Program.

—Small in-kind donations make a big difference

Think about all the things we use or wear on a daily basis: clothing, shoes, socks, underwear, shampoo, soap, toothpaste, razors... The list goes on. Broadway Youth Center and The Night Ministry regularly distribute these items to street-based youth. Donations of these unused items go directly to young people. Also helpful are CTA fare cards, which allow youth to get out of cold for several hours.

—Push for LGBTQ resources and funding on the South and West Sides of Chicago

LGBTQ-specific services on the South and West Sides of the city are few and far between. Those that do exist are underfunded. As a result, many young people have to travel far to get services, and others go without services altogether.

More recommendations on page 12

A young person studies for the GED at the Crib, The Night Ministry's LGBTQ-affirming shelter. Photo by Bill Healy.

Youth mug for the camera on Halsted. Photo by Bill Healy.

Drakera, 20, gets her nails done at the Crib. Photo by Bill Healy.

Jamal Marshall, 18, and Anshae Lorenzen, 21, walk downtown. The young men volunteer with Youth Pride Services. Photo by Bill Healy.

GENERATION HALSTED

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Recommendations from page 11

For Service Providers

"It's about standing in solidarity, not in charity."-- Bonnie Wade, longtime LGBTQ housing advocate

—Young people need a long-term fix

There is a dire absence of programs and services for LGBTQ youth that offer long-term solutions to homelessness. One youth interviewed for this series likened that fact to "bad parenting," stating that street-based youth need more than a constant flow of piecemeal services. Service providers should focus on how to transition youth out of homelessness, in addition to offering day-to-day assistance.

—Service providers need to sustain programs beyond the grants that create them

LGBTQ service providers frequently reference the number of youth they serve when they make fundraising pitches. But often, many of their youth programs are funded entirely through grants. That means when grants dry up, so do youth programs. Broadway Youth Center's transgender programs in particular have been hard-hit by this reality in recent years.

The Crib, The Night Ministry's youth shelter, has also faced this challenge as the city grant it operates on only covers part of the year. The Night Ministry tries to keep The Crib open by raising private funds to fill in that gap. When it was unable to raise enough this year, local churches stepped up to help supplement some of those services.

Grant-based programming is, of course, inevitable. But wherever possible, service providers should prioritize services for their most vulnerable. That means budgeting for services most direly needed by the community so that those services continue regardless of grants.

—Center on Halsted should re-evaluate its policies and practices surrounding youth

Center on Halsted youth staff do great work that is often overshadowed by the organization's strict policies on youth. Banning large numbers of youth only exacerbates the challenges facing youth, Lakeview residents and the Center itself. The Center has stated that it practices "restorative justice," a model for dealing with conflict and harm by healing rather than punishing those involved. What the Center has truly implemented, however, appears only to be a mediated process through which youth are forced to apologize in order to get back into the Center. This leaves little room for the Center to understand its own challenges and shortcomings in dealing with youth.

Center on Halsted staff and security should all receive comprehensive conflict de-escalation training. Security guards should stop publicly handcuffing LGBTQ youth in a Center that is meant to serve as a safe haven, especially in situations where youth are not acting violently in the moment. Further, the Center should reconsider its decision to employ armed off-duty police, which may make as many LGBTQ people feel scared as it does make others feels safe.

For Business owners

—Lakeview business owners should form partnerships with service providers through which young people can find work

Street-based youth in Lakeview largely want to find work and genuinely want to feel included in the community around them. Business owners can dramatically improve the circumstances for street-based LGBTQ youth by providing them safe and supportive work opportunities. Broadway Youth Center and Center on Halsted already work with youth on career development. Business owners should work with the organizations so that youth who are ready, can find work in the community.

Photos by Bill Healy.

—Local businesses can be resources for youth

Where do street-based youth get haircuts? What happens if a youth has a dental emergency? These are questions that Lakeview businesses could help service providers answer. And businesses that create positive relationships with youth also build goodwill between Lakeview's business community and its street-based population.

For lawmakers and policy advocates

—Transgender people need access to gender-affirming medical care

Access to gender-affirming medical care, including hormones and surgeries, would drastically reduce harmful situations facing transgender people in Chicago. Many transgender people choose to engage in sex work to fund gender-related healthcare because that care is so expensive that people are left with few other options. (It is important to note, however, that people engage in sex work for myriad reasons). Others turn to silicone pumping, a relatively inexpensive and extremely dangerous practice wherein an uncertified professional injects silicone into the body to create desired curves.

For Police

Recommendations for police are too numerous and serious to name, and addressing the many problems police have in serving LGBTQ young people would require a radical change in the culture of the Chicago Police Department. That said, here are a few small suggestions:

—Police urgently need training in LGBTQ issues

Reports about police interactions with transgender people are largely horrific, ranging from verbal harassment to outright physical abuse and discrimination. CPD lacks adequate training that would educate officers about transgender issues. Still, lack of understanding is not an excuse or reason for police to treat transgender as less than.

—Chicago Police leaders need to educate the force about the new transgender general order

This August, CPD adopted a general order that mandates more respectful treatment of transgender individuals. CPD leadership needs to create a culture in which abuses against transgender people are not accepted.

—Youth should be able to ask police for help without fear of rejection or reprisal

Reporters for this series heard from many youth who said that police ignore their requests for help or assistance when they try to report harassment. Others said that police accuse the young person of being engaged in illegal activity in response to their request for help. LGBTQ street-based youth are far more likely to be victims of crime than the general population. Their requests for assistance should be taken seriously.

For all of us

Organizations regularly hold forums where youth can learn from community leaders about their rights. Community leaders, however, have much to learn from young people. Service providers, funders, elected and non-elected officials, should convene a forum where youth voices are placed center. Windy City Times will gladly assist.