

Community services helping gay and lesbian youth

"Gay youth can be a very high-risk population. If we don't address homosexuality and deal with it, drugs, alcohol and suicide are some of the things that can happen."

— Liz Huesemann, Horizons Community Services (Chicago)

BY DELL RICHARDS

While many gay and lesbian adolescents dread the upcoming holidays because it means more time at home, young gay men and lesbians of Chicago look forward to what psychologists say is the most stressful time of year.

A feast of activities — from potlucks to caroling and parties — helps gay and lesbian youth feel they are part of a family.

This sense of belonging is critical because so many young gays feel alienated to begin with. During the winter holidays — from Thanksgiving to Hanukkah to Christmas and New Year's — they often find the emphasis on hearth and home too much to bear.

"Gay youth can be a very high-risk population," said Liz Huesemann of Horizons Community Services in Chicago.

"If we don't address homosexuality and deal with it, drugs, alcohol and suicide are just some of the things that can happen."

Huesemann, 33, knows what she's talking about because she's been there.

As a young lesbian, she became a victim of fear and isolation herself — one who turned to drugs and alcohol to dim the pain.

"I'm one of the statistics," said Huesemann. "I had a difficult time growing up. And I covered it up with drugs and alcohol."

Today, the 33-year-old woman heads youth services at the Chicago community center.

Like Huesemann, gay and lesbian youth face overwhelming odds in adolescence. Most are not out to their parents and are afraid their parents will find out.

This fear isn't just idle paranoia. Teens who are honest and open are often rejected by their family and friends. At school, they are laughed at, ridiculed and even beaten up. Their drop-out rate is way above the national average.

At one of the most critical periods of their lives, at a time when hormones and emotion are running at their highest, when belonging and being loved is one of their most pressing needs, they face a condemning and ruthlessly hostile environment.

The aim of Horizons is to help young gay, lesbian and bisexual youth deal with their sexuality during this harsh period, to integrate their sexuality into their lives and to become stable, adjusted adults. It provides role models, support groups, a library and a safe place to make friends with other gays their own age.

Without organizations like Horizons — of which there are only a handful in the United States — these overwhelming feelings of being alienated and outcast often lead to destructive means of escape such as drugs, alcohol and even suicide.

The recent report by the Department of Health and Human Services confirmed the gay community's worst fears about what the next generation has to face, citing suicide as the leading cause of death among gay and lesbian youth.

According to the report, gay and lesbian youth may account for nearly 30 percent of all successful youth suicides each year.

"Homosexuals are two to six times more likely to attempt suicide than are heterosexuals," the report stated.

These horrifying statistics aren't just

numbers at Horizons. The teenagers Huesemann deals with every day bear the scars of these terrifying figures.

"Our records show that one out of every four to five people in the youth group may have attempted suicide before coming into the program," said Huesemann.

Most gay youth have no one to turn to and are lucky if they can find a sympathetic adult who can help them with their fears.

The crying need for these services is evident not just from the number of suicides but the number of teens Horizons sees each year. Founded a decade ago, Horizons helped 400 gay youth this past year. Last year, 375 came through the doors seeking help.

"The program started because of the youth out there that were hiding," said Huesemann.

"Kids don't feel safe enough in school to say to teachers or friends that they are lesbian or gay."

Today, the organization provides a safe, fun place for gay teens from Illinois, Wisconsin and even Indiana.

In December, they'll have an evening of caroling with other gay friends and a "Just Because" party with music and dancing. This winter cornucopia comes after a Thanksgiving potluck held at a pizza parlor the night before the big event, a Halloween party, a Valentine's dance and a proper high school prom at a local restaurant that featured dinner and dancing.

"We're a social service agency but we try to provide lots of activities that are fun," said Huesemann.

The widely-respected agency now has two paid staff, 25 volunteers and is part of a larger community service network that provides services for drug and alcohol abusers and the homeless. Teens are referred to Horizons by social service programs throughout the state and it does its own outreach.

The center prints cards about itself and its services that teens from Horizons then take to their school and put in library books.

"The kids themselves put cards into books other kids might read," said Huesemann.

Horizons trains local teachers and counselors in how to deal with gay youth and the particular issues of self-hatred and low self-esteem they often have.

Huesemann speaks at schools statewide on a regular basis about being gay, talking about the risks gay youth face, answering questions and trying to combat negative stereotypes.

For Huesemann, being a speaker is one of the few painful aspects of the job.

"I often ask myself why I have to do this," said Huesemann. "And I wonder how many times in sex ed classes I have to see people and say I'm a homosexual. I keep asking why can't people just accept each other — whether they are heterosexual or homosexual?"

With a masters in social work, Huesemann has been working with teens for the past 10 years. Before becoming the first paid director of Horizons, she worked with teen drug and alcohol programs.

"I've always found it easy to communicate with kids," said Huesemann. "Probably because I had such a hard time myself."

When Huesemann counsels teens on the dangers of drugs and alcohol, she speaks from experience. She is a recovering alcoholic who started drinking in adolescence. Huesemann's father was a minister of a United Church of Christ, a fairly rigid religious denomination.

As a result of her strict upbringing, Huesemann understands how parents can be well-meaning but still part of the problem.

"They come to us because their kid doesn't come home anymore and they don't know how to deal with it," said Huesemann.

Huesemann does what she can to educate parents about the stereotypes of lesbians and gays. She tries to teach them that — contrary to their ideas — homosexuality is *not* a mental illness and that sexuality *cannot* be changed.

"But the emphasis is on the teen, not the parent," she said. Youth safety and protection are paramount.

"Many times the kids are not out to the parents. The parents may not even be aware that the kids are at Horizons. But that's okay. That's what we mean by a safe place."

To get around the need for parental permission to attend meetings, Horizons holds support groups rather than formal therapy groups. As many as 30 teens show up for the support groups. The weekly drop-in evenings can bring in as many as 80 teens a night.

If a teen needs special help, Huesemann herself does the immediate crisis intervention. But if a youngster requires long-term care, he or she can be referred to another counselor.

With 10 years under its belt, Horizons is looking forward to another decade of growth. One goal is to reach 500 teenagers in the next few years.

"Horizons is a place where gay kids don't have to be isolated, where they can make emotional connection," said Huesemann.

"It's really great to be able to participate in a program that's really needed."

Making those kinds of meaningful connections on a regular basis is essential for everyone, not just gay and lesbian youth.

And at its best, taking the time to do just that is what this holiday season is all about. ▼

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