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NORTHWEST news

NOT EITHER/OR

Trans center gives genderqueer youth a living room of their own

by Meg Daly

How does an 8-year-old make sense of impending puberty? For Llewyn Máire McCobb, ze hoped ze would shed hir penis. ("Ze" and "hir" are common trans pronouns and McCobb's preferred pronouns.)

As a young, not-yet-identified trans person, McCobb saw a photo of two naked gay men together with their penises tucked between their legs. But McCobb did not know about tucking and assumed gay men lost their penises as part of puberty.

"I figured my physical discomforts stemmed from this," says McCobb, "and that I was called a boy because I was gay and would go through some kind of metamorphosis when I hit puberty."

When that shedding of tissue did not take place, McCobb began hir journey of awareness that ze was not one gender or the other, nor one sexual orientation or the other. That journey included times of homelessness and self-medicating with hormones.

"While living in New Orleans I was able to score hormones through a drag queen I knew," says McCobb. "The types and amounts often changed. I didn't have much of a clue as to how much to take and had very limited access to clean needles."

Now, 15 years later, McCobb runs a program that serves young people whose stories mirror hir own. Ze is the coordinator of Outside In's Trans/Identity Resource Centre (TIRC), a 6-month-old program for trans, genderqueer and questioning youth.

TIRC is an evolution of the Identity Project, which helps transgender people get their names and/or sex designations changed on state identification cards or driver licenses. The Identity Project is still a component of TIRC, which also provides art-based programs, peer counseling, medical and counseling referrals, HIV testing and prevention, hormone syringe exchange and a variety of resources. Additionally, TIRC offers a weekly shuttle to a pharmacy to help people pick up their prescription hormones.

The need for TIRC was identified by Outside In staff and the youth themselves.

"Part of our mission is to respond to changing needs," says Kathy Oliver, who has been the executive director of Outside In for two decades. The nonprofit has been working to better the lives of homeless youth since 1968. Statistics show that at least 30 percent of homeless youth are sexual minorities. Oliver says trans youth are a growing constituency served by the organization.

"Trans homeless youth are the most targeted on the streets," says Oliver.

Oliver explains that TIRC is the latest project of Outside In's Risk Education Department. Outside In offers a number of vital services to homeless youth and low-income adults, including a medical clinic, a day program, transitional housing, an employment resource center, case management and HIV prevention.

McCobb says lack of resources is one of the major issues facing trans and genderqueer youth.

"Even with the resources and services developed at TIRC, I still find myself hitting walls where services don't exist," says the 33-year-old. "One example is a lack of trans and genderqueer-positive drug and alcohol rehab."

McCobb knows the importance of trans-sensitive health care firsthand. When ze was transitioning, ze was rejected by a Portland health care facility for not conforming to the



Llewyn Máire McCobb, director of the Trans/Identity Resource Centre

Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association's "Standards of Care" for the treatment of gender identity disorders.

"I knew they wanted me to present a 'traditional' gender and identify as heterosexual," says McCobb.

"With all honesty, I have no clue what a traditional gender is," ze says. So ze chose to be out about being "a kinky, pansexual genderqueer."

"In return," ze says, "I was thanked cordially for my honesty and was told there was nothing they could do for me."

Five years passed before McCobb found a therapist to work with who would provide a referral letter for hormones and bottom surgery.

"There is still little support in the dominant and queer cultures for trans-identified youth," says McCobb. "They are forced into a closet that was built by the mainstream and is reinforced by our own queer communities."

McCobb hopes TIRC can go a long way toward changing that. Located in a cozy house on Southwest 13th Avenue just a few blocks from Outside In's main center, TIRC provides a living room-type environment for its clients.

Additionally, McCobb intends TIRC to be a resource on trans sensitivity training for Outside In itself as well as other agencies that serve queer youth.

McCobb, who co-founded the Interactive Language performance arts festival, sees language and expression as essential tools for trans youth.

"[Youth] are often still able to see the world as a place of infinite potential, rather than a reality tunnel confined by dictated cultural norms," says McCobb.

At the safe space of TIRC, McCobb helps them discover that potential and be true to themselves. **JM**

The TRANS/IDENTITY RESOURCE CENTRE is open from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesday through Thursday at 1030 S.W. 13th Ave. For more information call 503-535-3895.