



OUTSIDE IN THEIR BEST CHANCE

I STARTED WORKING AT OUTSIDE IN 30 YEARS AGO BECAUSE at the time there weren't many safe places to work as an out lesbian. Over the last three decades, I have learned a lot about the homeless youth we serve including the startling fact that nationally, as well as locally, up to 40 percent of homeless youth identify as LGBTQ. We have heard too many stories of young people being kicked out of their homes after they find the courage to come out to their families. Fortunately, they find their way to Outside In where we can give them the support and help they need to heal, find acceptance and become self-sufficient. A critical component to this positive outcome is ensuring that LGBTQ homeless youth are able to have educational opportunities where they can be successful.

At Outside In, we believe education is a homeless youth's best chance at long-term success. With thanks to Portland Public Schools, we operate an accredited on-site alternative school called "Urban Ed." Additionally, we help youth enroll in post-secondary options. Last year we had 39 homeless youth enrolled in college, 24 youth obtained their GED, and 74 youth were employed in the community.

Our school is successful with LGBTQ students because of its integration with a career development program that understands the obstacles LGBTQ youth may face searching for employment. In particular, trans youth benefit from our expertise in navigating issues regarding legal identity and our ability to place them with friendly employers.

Our track record of success with LGBTQ students engenders positive word of mouth about our program among street youth. It also means that when youth come to school, they can see examples of other youth who identify as LGBTQ completing school, going to college, and graduating. Some of these youth return to our school to work as peer tutors. These peer tutors are persuasive examples of what can be achieved. We know that with adolescents, peers are listened to in ways adults are not.

Our students are also successful with their educational goals because the school does not operate in a vacuum. It is part of a comprehensive set of services and resources for youth who identify as LGBTQ, including housing, HIV supports, counseling, meals, health care, job training and a specialized support group our youth named QueerZone.

QueerZone allows LGBTQ youth to be part of a judgment free, creative environment. Allies are welcome, though most youth who attend are LGBTQ. QueerZone activities that take place include film viewing and discussion, a monthly birthday party, dance lessons, youth led yoga, queer music and history night, and just hanging out and getting the opportunity to be an adolescent without the pressures of street life. We offer a Recreation Group that focuses on excursions into the community. LGBTQ youth are often hesitant to access community events and seldom know what a rich queer community exists in Portland. Through the Rec Group they begin to visit the Q Center, open microphone nights, plays and performances, and Gay Skate. Support groups focus on helping youth build life skills including health and wellness. Examples are sessions that address safer sex, the gender binary system, stages of coming out, connection with our medical clinic's trans specific clinic, and healthy relationships. Our staff offer weekly HIV testing sessions and conduct safe sex workshops to make sure health problems don't interfere with their ability to focus on school.

Outside In has been selected as the beneficiary for Just Out's Sizzlin' Summer promotional events this Summer.

*Kathy Oliver, PhD
Executive Director at Outside In
Outside In helps homeless youth and other marginalized people move towards improved health and self-sufficiency.*