

# Fostering PRIDE

*Child welfare workers will be looking for potential foster parents at this weekend's Pride celebration on the Portland waterfront*

BY EMILY GREEN  
STAFF WRITER

**G**rowing up LGBTQ can be tough. For kids growing up Oregon's foster care system, it can be even tougher.

From the time Rickey Bedolla was about 3 years old, he spent most his childhood in one Washington County foster home or another.

As he was becoming a teenager, he'd found a stable placement where he'd stayed for five years.

It was around age 13 that Bedolla began to question his sexual orientation. There was this boy at school, he said, that kind of "sparked it."

The family he was living with at the time was religious, "but they didn't force it on you," he said.

Their brand of faith was better than a family he'd lived with previously, he explained, which "was the forced-upon-religious type of home."

He'd heard stories about a girl who couldn't stay at her home after coming out as a lesbian, and he never broached the subject of sexuality with his foster family.

Lucky for Bedolla, his child welfare caseworker noticed he was starting to have identity questions. This caseworker, an employee of Oregon's Department of

Human Services, or DHS, decided to place him with Matthew Fisher and Joe Williams – a gay married couple the caseworker had placed other kids with in the past.

"We were always kind of the go-to with the LGBT youth," said Williams. "There was obviously a need out there for more, at least just accepting foster parents."

Sage Dupre, 18, is a bisexual-identified youth who has been in foster care for the past 5 years. Out of the six placements she's had, she said it wasn't until she was placed at her current LGBTQ-specific foster home in Gresham that she finally felt accepted for



PHOTO BY EMILY GREEN

*Rickey Bedolla plays the piano for his former foster dads, Matthew Fisher (at left) and Joe Williams (at right) at their home in Tigard. The couple enrolled Bedolla in piano lessons when he was placed with them as a young teenager, and they attended his first recital. Bedolla still visits their home on a weekly basis as an "honorary family" member.*

## LGBT youths have different problems

A survey of more than 10,000 U.S. youths ages 13 to 17 asked: "Your most important problem ..."

### Non-LGBTQ Youth

- Classes, exams, grades
- College, career
- Finances related to college/job

### LGBTQ Youth

- Non-accepting families
- School bullying
- Fear of being out or open

Source: Human Rights Campaign, "Growing Up LGBT in America" (2012)

who she is.

She said at one home she was in, the foster mother would watch her closely, not allowing her to be alone with girls and scrutinizing her every move. Religion was a factor in that home, but she said part of the problem was that many foster families didn't know anyone in the LGBTQ community, so they had a hard time understanding her.

Once she said she got in trouble for explaining what it meant to be gay to another foster child who had asked her about it.

"It's been a rough road," she said.

## 'It's really bad'

Every night, in Multnomah County alone, five to 13 foster kids sleep in hotel rooms because DHS has nowhere else to put them, said Melissa Masserant, a foster and adoption trainer for DHS's child welfare division.

"It's really bad. Across the board we're in need of more foster families," Masserant said. "It's not just Multnomah County, it's a need across the state. But we are putting special emphasis on trying to find homes that are affirming for LGBTQ-identified youth."

DHS spokesperson Andrea Cantu Schomus said it's difficult for DHS to measure exactly how many additional foster parents the agency would need to meet the demands of finding placements, as it varies depending on the needs of the kids and

where they live.

But in July 2016, Reginald Richardson, deputy director at DHS, reported the agency had lost more than 400 family-run foster beds and 100 residential facility beds in the span of 12 months.

A statewide assessment the same year found the agency had fewer than half the number of homes for foster children than Cantu Schomus said it would ideally have in order to match kids with the right foster families.

Anytime the child welfare system experiences a shortage of foster parents, it exacerbates the difficulties in placing kids who have specific needs, such as LGBTQ youths, said Cari King.

King chairs DHS's PRIDE Employee Resource Group, which was informally established nearly a decade ago. Today it serves as a resource support group for LGBTQ-identified youths' needs in the foster care system.

One of King's focuses is recruiting new foster parents from the LGBTQ community.

"We have about two times as many LGBTQ-identified youth in (foster) care as in general population," King said. "It's important that we are placing LGBTQ youth in families that are not only just OK with their identity, but affirming."

That's one reason DHS will have a booth at this weekend's Pride Northwest celebration at Tom McCall Waterfront Park

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