

**FOSTER, from page 8**

where festival goers can learn more about becoming an adoptive or foster parent.

Last year 40 people who visited the Pride festival booth filled out forms for adopting and fostering youths.

But the booth is also intended to let the LGBTQ community know that in Oregon, they are wanted as foster and adoptive parents.

Child welfare agencies in many states “go back and forth on whether they want to work with LGBTQ couples,” said King. “Not only is Oregon willing, but eager to work with LGBTQ families.”

Like same-sex couples, many people who rent or who are single often assume they are not eligible to become foster parents, Masserant said. But in Oregon, that’s not the case.

But having someone who can accept and support an LGBTQ child’s self expression in the home can make a big difference in a youths’ life.

Among straight kids, a Human Rights Campaign survey of 10,000 American teenagers found their top problems were issues around college and career, grades and classes and finances related to college or their job.

In contrast, the same survey found that for LGBTQ youths, school bullying, non-accepting families and fear of being out or open topped the list – not that they don’t have all the pressures of graduating high-school and paying for college as well.

For kids growing up LGBTQ in Oregon’s foster care system, a whole additional layer of trauma and family-related problems are piled on.

“We’re looking for people with tools and skills around supporting youth – whether they be within the community or allies. Understanding the nuances of caring for a child who is LGBTQ is important. Especially given the statistics we’ve seen,” said King.

King was referencing the Williams Institute’s Los Angeles Foster Youth Study conducted in 2014.

The study found: “LGBTQ youth have a higher average number of foster care placements and are more likely to be living in a group home. They also reported being treated less well by the child welfare system, were more likely to have been hospitalized for emotional reasons at some point in their lifetime, and were more likely to have been homeless at some point in their life.”

Regardless of religion or personal beliefs, said King, DHS expects all foster families to accept and be affirming of all youths’ identities.

It’s also a stipulation of the Oregon Foster Children’s Bill of Rights. King said when DHS hears a foster parent is discriminating against a foster child, “we try to address that through their certifier.”

**‘Honorary family’**

Before they married, Fisher and Williams had discussed their priorities, and kids were not part of the plan. Williams worked as an executive restaurant chef and Fisher as a trial lawyer. Both had busy schedules and the couple wanted to travel the world,

not raise kids.

It was when Fisher had a client who routinely took in LGBTQ youths who had been evicted from their families that the couple began to rethink the possibility of having youths in their home.

“She had commented about there being a tremendous need,” said Fisher.

The couple began to think about taking in wayward teens as a way of giving back to the community.

“We were very specific about wanting roughly high-school age kids that were displaced because of their sexual orientation,” said Fisher.

It was about seven years ago when the couple approached the DHS booth at the Portland Pride festival to find out more about how they could begin to help displaced LGBTQ youths.

They soon took the introductory class, and slowly, they completed the certification process, still weighing their options and deciding whether or not foster parenting was right for them.

What they discovered was that most teenagers who are evicted for being LGBTQ-identified, don’t end up in DHS custody, said Fisher. They began to take in children of all ages, and were often contacted for temporary placement of LGBTQ youths just entering the system.

“What we’ve experienced is there is really a lot of need for people to help trans kids in the community,” said Williams. “We got a lot of phone calls that were either emergency placements or long-term placements, and they were often at times when our home was full.”

Fisher added, “We would often turn kids away because we were focused on the individuals here.”

Today Williams is a stay-at-home dad, and the couple has an adopted daughter and is in the process of adopting two more kids who came into their lives through foster care.

“We traveled and we had a great time. We have a whole wall covered with photos of trips we’ve taken all over the world – now we can’t even go to the theater!” laughed Fisher.

Less than six months after being placed in their home when he was 13, Bedolla came out to Williams and Fisher.

“When he came out of the closet though,” Williams said, “those closet doors, they blew off, and he came out with jazz hands!”

Fisher said if he could dictate a child’s sexual orientation, he would tell them to be straight – it’s much easier.

“We’ve never encouraged someone – ‘Being gay is awesome! You should give it a shot!’ That’s not our job, our job is to provide a safe and nurturing environment,” he said.

But Fisher and Williams were able to help Bedolla with some of the nuances of coming of age as a gay male.

When Bedolla came home from sexual-education class at school, they asked him if he learned how to use a condom. He hadn’t, so they were there to teach him without judgment.

Fisher said with the prevalence of HIV in the LGBTQ community, it was imperative that Bedolla knew how to be safe, but they made sure he also knew they were not encouraging sexual activity.

**Find out if foster parenting is right for you**

Despite common misperceptions, Oregon DHS urges LGBTQ couples, singles and people who rent to become foster parents. You must be at least 21 years of age and financially capable of supporting yourself.

**Pride celebration booth**

Visit the Oregon child welfare PRIDE ERG booth at the Portland Pride Northwest festival this weekend. DHS staff will be on hand to answer questions and hand out information. The booth will be located in slot D5 to the left of the sound stage along the main promenade on the South Waterfront.

**Attend an introductory meeting**

DHS holds informational meetings about becoming a foster parent twice a month. There is no financial investment or commitment necessary to attend one of these meetings. The instructor will provide you with an overview of the certification process, qualifications and DHS expectations.

**For Multnomah County residents:**

Wednesdays from 7 p.m. to 8:30 p.m.

Use East Entrance

July 5

Aug. 2

Sept. 6

Wednesdays from 10:30 a.m. to 12 p.m.

Use Main Entrance

July 19

Aug. 16

Sept. 20

DHS East County Family Service Center  
11826 NE Glisan St.  
Portland, OR 97220

To register, call the Metro Training Line:  
971-673-1822

If you are an Oregonian who lives outside of Multnomah County: call 1-800-331-0503 toll free to find out about an informational meeting near you.

“We still refer to it as our ‘banana condom dinner,’” Fisher said.

Now 17, Bedolla lives with his mother. But he says the time he spent living with Williams and Fisher was one of positive growth. He still visits their home in Tigard on a weekly basis.

“He’s honorary family,” said Fisher, to which Bedolla grinned.

The couple has some advice for prospective adoptive and foster parents.

“If there is anyone who is going to read your story and thinks, I have heard horror stories about the foster system, I don’t want to be a part of that, but my husband and I are really interested in adoption,” said Fisher, “I think that you are potentially setting yourself up for failure because you don’t know what you are getting into unless you have at least fostered a couple kids first.”

Williams agreed. He said while foster parenting can be challenging at times, it’s beyond rewarding to see the changes made in kids’ lives.

“We never knew we wanted to be parents until we were parents,” said Williams. “And the foster system led us there.”

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