



PHOTO BY ELLENA ROSENTHAL

Brandon is a patient at Prism Health in Portland. He never felt safe at a doctor's office until he discovered the clinic, which focuses on primary care for LGBTQ+ patients. Prism operates under the umbrella of Cascade AIDS Project.

BY ELLENA ROSENTHAL
STAFF WRITER

Brandon wore his favorite blue nail polish the first time he visited Prism Health, and as he walked into the brightly colored building on Portland's Southeast Belmont Street, a staff member complimented him on the color.

For some, this exchange may seem unremarkable. But for Brandon, the throwaway line welcomed him in – he let out a sigh of relief. Brandon felt accepted, seen and not judged, a rare occurrence for him at a doctor's office.

"My kind, they're not respected where I'm from," said Brandon, whose long blond locks of hair hang below his shoulders.

He was not fully out as gay in his hometown and did not see the importance of going to a doctor. Brandon, who is using a pseudonym for this story, never felt safe or at ease in doctors' offices, and the thought of bringing up safe sex or testing for sexually transmitted infections made him shudder.

"No one wants to talk or think about gay sex – even the thought of it," he said. "I just wouldn't bring it up."

Brandon made every excuse not to go to the doctor's before moving to Portland from Hillsboro. And then he found Prism.

Prism Health is Oregon's first allopathic health clinic focused on primary care for the LGBTQ+ communities. Prism offers referrals, prescriptions and diagnoses. Patients come to Prism for affirming primary care and LGBTQ+-specific care all in one place.

HEALTH CARE

No stigma. No judgment.

Prism Health specializes in the medical needs of people in Oregon's LGBTQ+ communities

"At Prism, I can say 'gay sex,' and it's OK. It's like asking if you want cream in your coffee," Brandon said.

Now, Brandon has a prescription for PrEP, a pill taken once a day – regardless of sexual activity – that drastically lowers the risk of HIV infection, and continuous contact with a primary care provider, something he has not had since a routine sports physical at 15, where a doctor quickly evaluated him before sending him off to the field.

Opened in May, Prism operates under the umbrella and leadership of Cascade AIDS Project, a Portland nonprofit that offers services to test, treat and assist those living with HIV. Part of Prism's services include Pivot, a walk-in center that provides free screenings for HIV and sexually transmitted infections for the LGBTQ+ community.

Not all traditional health care practices acknowledge the specialized health care needs of people in the LGBTQ+ community.

A transmasculine person, who wished to remain anonymous, said they receive health care in Portland, and their ideal situation is going to a doctor who has basic levels of understanding of trans people and trans issues. They want the care they need without having to educate. Finding appropriate care can take weeks, if not months, and usually falls to those seeking it out, not those who are supposed to provide it.

"It's not just specialty doctors, like surgeons or OBGYNs that are needed for LGBTQ+-specific health," they said. "The struggle we have with primary care is those doctors barely have a basic understanding of the community, so many assumptions are made and care that could be provided is missed."

For instance, a patient who is a transgender man and has top surgery might still need mammograms since breast tissue can be left behind in the chest wall. Or a transgender woman might need prostate

exams. Some patients feel safe at Prism because providers ask questions that are pertinent to the queer community, like "what parts of your body do you use for sex?", and it is commonplace for providers to first ask and then use correct pronouns and names.

Inscribed on her silver bangle bracelet are four words that could be Deven Ferte's motto: "Until There's a Cure." Ferte, the operations manager at Prism, has been wearing this bracelet since the mid-'90s, when her mother bought it for her at The Body Shop during the AIDS epidemic.

For Ferte, opening and managing Prism is important work. Ferte identifies as queer and understands the need for comprehensive, culturally appropriate and trauma-informed health care.

"We hear all the time about the awful health care for the LGBTQ+ community, the lack of understanding, the stigma and the judgment," Ferte said.

One patient found himself at Prism because when he asked a previous care provider for a PrEP prescription, his doctor gave him a referral to see a counselor instead.

"Would a heterosexual person be given a mental health referral if they asked for birth control pills?" Ferte asked. "No, that would never happen. Yet when people in our community want to be proactive about their sexual health, they are labeled as mentally unwell."

Another patient drives more than two hours to come to Prism because of the