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LOCAL FEATURE

Gay, young & homeless

More beds are needed to get off the streets

By [Deena Guzder](#)
Friday, July 08, 2005

At Sylvia's Place, the shelter's rows of collapsible cots are aligned as closely as a wartime hospital. Yet the aroma of lasagna from the kitchen and soft music from an old stereo gives a sense of home.

The West 36th Street shelter, run by the Metropolitan Community Church of New York, provides 24-hour emergency night shelter for gay teens ages 16 to 23. The shelter is nearly always filled beyond capacity.

More than a dozen public and private studies have shown that gay teens constitute 20 to 42 percent of young homeless nationwide. Nearly 7,000 homeless gay youth currently live in New York City, by some estimates. But only 26 beds serve them.

Kate Barnhart, the executive director of Sylvia's Place, says the shelter "attracts youth who were kicked out of their homes for coming out of the closet — and the shelter is their first stop." Barnhart adds that the shelter also gets those "shuffled and discarded by the system. So in some ways, the shelter is also a last stop."

Mason (not his real name), a 23-year-old Brooklyn native says he decided to move in with his sister when his mother relocated to Florida. Alternately upbeat and somber, he tells of his sister and her boyfriend's drug addiction. Mason spent four months at the rough Bellevue Men's Shelter. "How many times are you going to be called a faggot or have some creepy guy shove \$20 in your pocket and say 'come on'?" he asks. "The caseworkers were homophobic to your face."

Lying about his age, he slept at the venerable Bowery Mission. He then spent a few nights at Harlem United before contacting a youth counselor at Safe Horizon's Streetwork Project, which works in Times Square. He was referred to Sylvia's Place, and he relocated that very night.

"It was the first gay friendly shelter I had stayed in," he now says. "If I had known, I would have come here in the beginning."

Since Sylvia's Place provides only a short-term respite, Mason put himself on the waitlist at the Ali



Only a few beds in a handful of shelters provide the thousands who are thrown out of their homes the city from small towns.

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Forney Center in hopes of securing more permanent housing. After a month and a half, Mason received an acceptance call and moved once again.

Mason spoke favorably about the month he spent at the Ali Forney Day Center, in the Flemister House in Chelsea. He alleges that some straight kids often pretended to be bisexual or "gay-curious" to be admitted.

Safe spaces for gay youth

"People tend to be friendly and caring in gay shelters so I don't mind a straight kid staying with us if they're afraid of going elsewhere but they better not be calling me 'faggot' because this is my safe place," Mason says. "They're the aliens this time, not me."

Barnhart notes a seven-day assessment period to determine sexual orientation. "We don't straight kids who are comfortable in an LGBT environment but we've heard stories of hom she says.

Sylvia's Place provides food, tutoring and interview clothes. But several clients have disc finding a job without a permanent address and identification card is nearly impossible.

Between shelters, Mason spent two nights riding the subways. He said he took care to dre himself well in order to avoid problems with the police. Out of cash, Mason turned to the e many gay homeless youth: He posted pictures on a Web site and hustled.

"I've done peer counseling so I know how to protect myself," he says. "But I don't think m do. One of my friends got HIV but we don't mention it to his face. What can we say? We'r vulnerable. I tell my friends which client I'm meeting and when I'll be back so we keep ea safe."

Mason would like to see more gay-only youth shelters. Barnhart agrees.

"A lot of regular shelters are unsafe for queer youth," she says. "The staff at most of thes a high turnover rate and no interest in creating a space free of homophobia."

One of the shelters currently receiving the most state funding is Catholic-run Covenant Ho particularly notorious among Sylvia's Place residents. "Places like Covenant House create ; environment for LGBT individuals because they're targeted for harassment, theft and beat Jamie Weddle, from the Peter Cicchino Youth Project at Urban Justice. "Sometimes it's so prefer to stay on the streets."

Barnhart says, "We call the kids who come from Covenant House the 'refugees.'"

"Who would feel comfortable in a place that's openly hostile to abortion, safe sex and hom asks Michele Maraziti, Ali Forney's program director. "They need to be held responsible be get the most public money." A Covenant House spokesperson refused to comment.

Bridgette Esposito, 23, says her life was threatened at Covenant House. Her mother had k of her house when she turned 13. She went to Saint Dominic's Home in Blauvelt, N.Y., wh men accosted her. Then she was transferred to a group home where she claims the staff k give her lithium. "All I wanted was food and a place to sleep but they kept saying I was tr she says.

During her stay there, Esposito entered into an eight-year abusive relationship with an ol resulted in a baby girl. Without any inflection in her voice, she explains, "Then one day I c him beating on me anymore so I rammed my car into him. Twice." She ended up spending in jail.

On parole, Esposito says she feared returning to prison if she didn't find a permanent resi August 2004, she entered Franklin Assessment Shelter in Brooklyn, which she describes a



and “hellish.” Esposito’s parole officer referred her to Safe Horizon’s Streetworks, where she stayed for three weeks.

In March, Ali Forney informed her that a bed was available. Esposito sighs, “If I had known places for queer youth, I would have gone there right away.”

Too many clients, not enough \$\$

A wide range of social service agencies, including Neutral Zone, Streetworks, the Center’s Enrichment Services, the Anti-Violence Center and the Urban Justice Center, try to help the growing population of homeless gay youth.

“The real problem is a severe shortage of LGBT shelters,” says Patrick Markee, of the Coal Homeless. “What’s available now simply isn’t safe and the city hasn’t done nearly enough.”

Michele Maraziti says the media talks about gay marriage, “but nobody even mentions the people who are forced to leave home.”

Kedar Powell is an 18-year-old Jamaican native whose mother said he was crazy. She sent him to boarding school in Florida and said, “I don’t want you here. I don’t know why God put you on Earth and why He made you this way.” Powell can recount the times when she sprinkled bleach on his clothes to “cure” him of his homosexuality.

“We’re encouraging youth to come out of the closet but their parents often won’t accept it. It’s a very dangerous situation,” says Maraziti, who tells stories of parents who believe their gay children negatively affect his or her siblings, “Sometimes they won’t let them eat from the same plate as a major crisis.”

At any given time, the waitlist at the Ali Forney center hovers around 150. “It would be more kids knew places like ours existed,” Lopez says. Most clients find out about Ali Forney outreach workers on the West Side Piers or along Christopher Street.

Homeless advocates point to “zero tolerance” policing and enforcement of “quality of life” as well as changes in police policies and practices since 9/11. “The police are basically harassing the kids when they’re out on the streets. They’re continuously telling them to ‘move on.’” Barnhart says. “Homeless LGBT youth are disproportionately affected by such regulations, often accompanied by police misconduct and abuse.”

Attorney Stephen Edwards insists that police target gay and transgender kids — a sentiment shared by other homeless advocates.

Even so, gay youth flock to New York because of its reputation for tolerance.

Most of the homeless shelters rely on underpaid and overworked staff as well as a handful of volunteers. “People like Kate Barnhart are New York City’s unknown angels,” Edwards says. “She’s turned down a lot of higher paying jobs to do what she does.”

Above all, Barnhart wants people to remember that “they tend to have stereotypes about them. The truth is, they’re just regular kids.”

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