

New Jersey State Bar LGBT Keynote | January 17, 2013

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1. Intro - Humble Beggars

A wise friend in this work once told me something that sticks with me most of the days that I get to serve these kids - we are all just humble beggars asking other humble beggars for a piece of bread. Fifteen years ago, I wasn't smart enough, old enough and certainly hadn't made enough mistakes to even get what that meant. But now I'm starting to, and these wonderful kids (and my brothers and sisters in the work of serving them) have been the most helpful of teachers.

In short, we're not the 'lucky', 'privileged' ones bestowing upon them our great help, and they're not the 'unlucky', 'hurting' ones who should be grateful to receive it. They have power and talents and scars and challenges. We have power and talents and scars and challenges. The universe has put us in a relationship where we give and we get, and where they give and they get. Yes, we're paid to sit with them, coach them, challenge them and love them while they work really hard to change their lives - but it's so much more than that as well.

As I speak to you today, I thought that this framework would be helpful to convey to you so you can have a deeper sense of how I - and all of us at Covenant House - approach the work we do. (On our best days. Not all of our days are our best days...)

2. Christianity and LGBT Services

I never do well with elephants in the room, and so I want to name something upfront both for that reason, but also because I think that it gives a great context by which we can talk about some of the important issues here. Some of the branches of Covenant House, which is in six countries throughout North and Latin America, have a reputation in the community for poor or inconsistent treatment of LGBT youth.

When an organization is serving LGBT kids and is rooted in Christianity, as mine is, I find there to be a public perception that it's all now really complex. The question arises way too often, "How can a Christian organization serve LGBT kids?" as if there's a paradox or incongruence there. So here's the answer, and it's an easy one, "With absolute respect and unconditional love. The same way we strive to serve any other young person." As I prepared my remarks for today, I gave a lot of thought as to whether I'm saying enough on that. Whether the issue is too big or too complicated or too important to not say much more. But I guess I'm not just not sure what else to say. It's really simple. If we, as Christians, look to Jesus' example on this earth, that is the only answer.

- "Love your neighbor as yourself."
- "Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another."
- "Now that I have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you."

Now, I'm not a theologian. There are many who are much more studied and smart about all of this than I am. In fact, in the interest of full disclosure, I'm a lawyer. While I often feel the need to follow that with an "I'm sorry", I don't today, because that fact makes me pretty skilled at reading and following the rules. For people of my faith, Christ gave us the rules. There are no mixed messages here, my friends.

When judgment and bigotry and hatred get themselves mixed up with religion, bad things happen. The scripture is very clear about loving and serving everyone, without judgment and without random discrimination. And we have to be very clear as well. Too often, it's how LGBT kids became homeless in the first place...someone in their household had a belief

that the way the young person was living was out of alignment with Christ's teachings and were no longer allowed in the home. That is wrong. That is tragic. And we are far too devoted to these kids to allow that untruth to continue to impact the one precious life they get. Even if, for whatever reason, you're not a proponent of marriage and relationship equality...even if you're not fiercely committed to letting people be who God made them to be...those of us serving homeless kids have to be opposed to practices that make kids homeless. Disowning kids because they are gay or lesbian or transgendered makes them homeless.

So if a staff or volunteer - even one with good intentions, even one who is otherwise smart and talented - uses their beliefs or any other justification to not provide extraordinary care to a struggling young person, they are not worthy of the privilege to serve and are asked to leave.

3. Lives of LGBT Kids in Homeless Shelters

So why is there a perception that homeless LGBT kids, when living in shelters that accept all kids (shelters that don't cater specifically to those who share more in common with them), are not treated as well as the others? I've given that a lot of thought, long before I was invited to be here today, and my colleagues have as well.

Some observations that we've humbly made:

Other Kids.

In NJ alone, Covenant House sleeps over 150 homeless kids each night. Another 50 or so come through our doors each day for day services. In a year, that amounts to nearly 1000 residents. It's a lot of kids to bump into. Many of them are naturally angry, hurting and insecure in themselves because of the hand they've been dealt in life. All of them are adolescents, developmentally at a stage in their growth in which they're sorting through who they are and where they fit. So they lash out. They separate from this one and align with this other one. Sometimes, they are downright cruel. In some ways, it's a high school full of kids who have received little love and guidance in life and spend 24/7 together. They don't like this one because of how he talks, this one because of how she looked at my boyfriend and, yes, this one because she's a lesbian or because he's transgendered. But that's not as much the problem. They need education and guidance, but it's not the truest issue.

This is the issue - When unchecked by our workers and volunteers, this creates a terrible, inexcusable hostile living environment that is completely out of alignment with mission. I can't lie to you and say it doesn't happen in our shop. Sadly, it sometimes does. And not for a second should my words be interpreted as an excuse or defense. But I can say this - it's getting better. I've been at Covenant House since the 90s, and it's getting better. The work that so many in this room and other similar rooms are doing to change the public perception of LGBT kids and adults is transforming our society. It's making the world that my kids are growing up in a different one from the one I grew up in. And, I'm happy to say, this has found its way into homeless shelters and has made the lives of the kids there so much better.

Meeting Them Where They Are.

Another observation is this. Some important principles guide the work that we do in serving homeless kids, and one of them is to meet them where they are. Now that seems obvious - of course we meet them where they are, where else are we going to meet them? But truly, that is sometimes lost upon us. The 17, 18, 19 years that preceded the youth coming to us were often quite difficult - and, naturally, not in just one way. Some have been abused or neglected. Some cannot read. Some have a mental illness. Some grew up in extreme poverty, often as the third or fourth generation. And some have been discarded by their families because they're gay or transgendered. (And many face a combination of those life experiences. Or all of them.)

So workers, I think, sometimes find it hard to meet the young person where he or she is because it's simply too much. Too much to solve. Too much to handle. We're fixers, and we want to fix, but the fixing seems too hard, so we don't fully accept who they are and how that's impacted their lives. But that is the job, the difficult and beautiful job, of serving homeless kids - ALL homeless kids, LGBT or not. We meet them, we love them and we serve them exactly where they are. The mission of my organization calls us to 'absolute respect and unconditional love' and that is the objective. Always. Period.

Therefore, our workers must be extraordinary people to do these jobs well...and we all know that they are very difficult and trying jobs. We ask so much of them. But, as we tell them all the time, we ask even more of the kids we serve. We ask kids who were living on the street yesterday to go to class, do their chores, learn respectful conflict resolution and be in by 9pm today. Oh yeah, and you also have to take off your hat, hike up those pants, clean up your language and share your feelings.

So, yes, we ask a lot of our staff as well. We ask them to be humble and open and super smart - equipped with all of the knowledge they need to do their jobs well. Part of that knowledge is how sexual orientation impacts the cause and the experience of homelessness among youth.

So, what do we do with that? If you have any shortcuts, I'd love to hear them, but I haven't found one yet. All we've found is lots of culture-setting, lots of training, lots of coaching and lots of processing with workers - young and older - is the only way. For no matter our professions, our training and our positions in this work, our success really comes down to one simple thing: the relationships that we form with the young people we serve. Relationships that are rooted not in tolerance, not even in acceptance, but in celebration. In devotion. In reverence. In reverence of who they are. In reverence of their beautiful gifts. In reverence of the perfection in which their creator made them - whoever we all happen to believe it to be.

4. How Should We Serve LGBT Homeless Kids?

So, back to that original question that I get asked so often. How does a Christian organization serve homeless LGBT kids? The answer is exactly the same as how ANY organization should serve homeless LGBT kids. So I did one slide for this presentation, the important stuff, the 'what can we do' stuff:

- Meet them where they are.
- Invite them into a dialogue to own what is theirs, detach from what is not and envision what they want from their rest of their lives.
- Remain compassionate to the added burdens they face in this world because of their sexuality and create our program structures accordingly.
- Wrap around them with services that help them to sort through and come to peace with the challenges that the world has thrust upon them because of who they are.
- Give them the respect that they deserve as a child of this universe.
- Learn from them what their lives and experiences have to teach us as fellow humble beggars.
- And LOVE them, love them, love them, *unconditionally*, into a happy, healthy adulthood.