



FREEDOM FROM FEAR

Creating Safe Spaces for LGBT Youth



Members of PFLAG march with their signs in the PrideFest 2005 parade in St. Louis. © AP Images/James A. Finley

Despite recent legal and social progress, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) individuals continue to face intolerance and inequality around the world. LGBT youth in particular face discrimination, harassment and violence in their communities, at school and at home. In short, many of them live in fear.

In the United States, a variety of grass-roots organizations have emerged to combat prejudices, educate communities and ensure the safety and well-being of LGBT young people.

Supporting Youth

Aram Vartian, a videographer from the Washington area, struggled as a teenager to come to terms with his sexual orientation and the fear of rejection by his family and friends. “I was 14 when it really rang clear — when I started going home and crying, when I really was looking for a way out, when I felt trapped,” he says.

Vartian found support at the Sexual Minority Youth Assistance League (SMYAL), a nonprofit that provides after-school activities, support groups and leadership

development opportunities for LGBT youth.

“I had never walked into a room and felt safe,” he says. “There had never been a time before that where I had walked into a room with other kids and every single one of them reached out to me — every single one of them was happy I was there.”

“The process of coming out can be very lonely,” says SMYAL’s executive director, Andrew Barnett. Organizations like SMYAL give LGBT young people an opportunity to meet others who are facing the same challenges.

According to Barnett, “LGBT youth encounter many significant hardships that reduce their likelihood of growing into happy, healthy adults and productive members of society.” They face real risks in the form of “harassment, victimization, [and] violence,” as well as “the emotional trauma that can come from being rejected by one’s family.”

Therefore, Barnett says, access to safe spaces — places where LGBT youth “can feel free to express their sexual orientation, their gender identity, their gender expression, as well as all of the other dimensions of their being without fear” — is critical to proper development.

Vartian agrees. “Fear is crushing,” he says, “and without safety, without a place where kids can go and just feel comfortable, can be who they are, they can’t grow.”

Educating Communities

Like Vartian, University of Maryland senior Elysha Valera struggled to come out in her teen years. “I was at a very dark place at that point in my life,” she says.

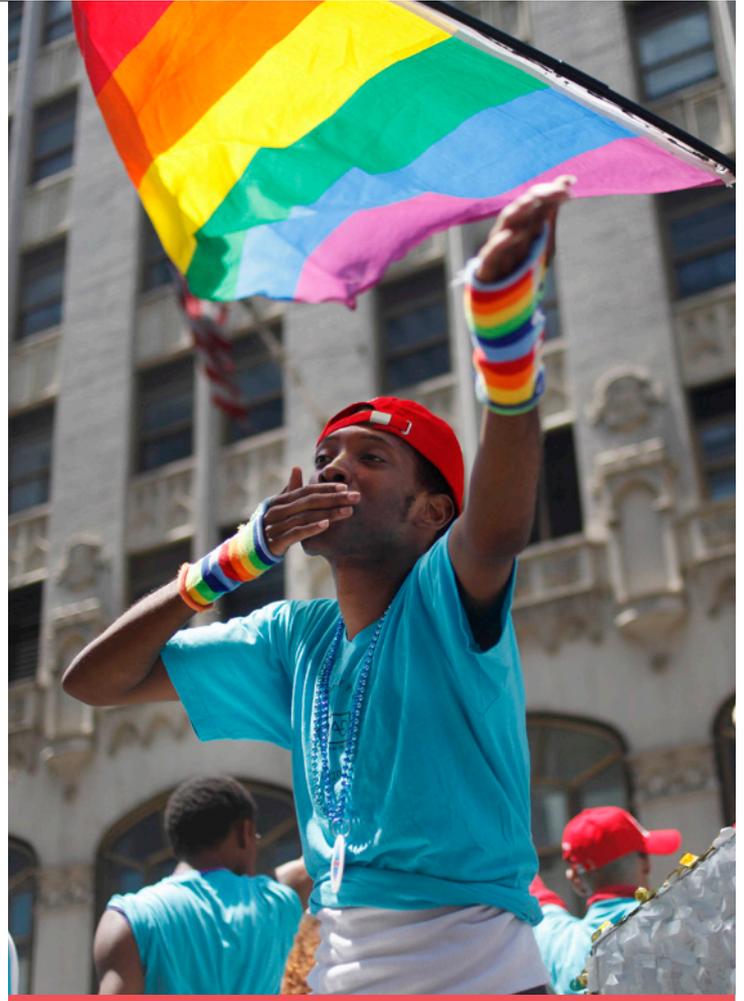
“I didn’t really know how to tell anybody,” says Valera. “I kept a journal, and that’s how I vented all my thoughts and all my desperate feelings.”

When she went to college, though, Valera found her safe space at the university’s LGBT Equity Center. “That’s where I found a circle of friends — people I could relate to.”

“Having a visibly safe space tells me that I can be myself, I can talk about whatever it is I need to talk about, and if there’s a problem, I can seek help and have it resolved,” says the center’s director, Luke S. Jensen, Ph.D.

The center serves as a hub connecting LGBT students with the resources they need on campus. “We also try to foster community and to encourage leadership,” Jensen says, “because we want our students to learn how to advocate for themselves and others.”

Valera became an advocate by producing and directing the university’s first *Queer Monologues*, a series of true-to-life performances dealing with the challenges of coming out and living as an LGBT individual.



A man blows kisses to spectators during New York’s annual Gay Pride Parade in 2009.
© AP Images/Seth Wenig

“We’ve made a lot of progress in America, but we’ve still got a long way to go,” she says. “There was such a need for people to hear our stories.”

The *Monologues* were a hit with the community — and with Valera’s parents. Though they were initially uncomfortable with Valera’s sexual orientation, they showed their support by attending the performances. “I bet my dad probably teared up at some point, too,” she says.

Advocating for Change

Joubert X. Glover, a recent graduate of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, was not so lucky. He wrestled for months with how to come out to his parents.

RESOURCES

Global Equality Fund: Collaborative effort of the U.S. Department of State that aims to empower LGBT persons to live freely and without discrimination. Supports programs that advance the human rights of LGBT people around the world.

www.state.gov/globalequality

Campus Pride: Develops and supports LGBT and ally student leaders and organizations to create safer, more inclusive college and university campuses; produces LGBT-Friendly Campus Climate Index to help higher education institutions improve campus life.

www.campuspride.org

Consortium of Higher Education LGBT Resource Professionals: Promotes LGBT-friendly environments in higher education by supporting faculty and staff, developing curricula, and advocating for policy change, program development, and establishment of LGBT offices and centers.

www.LGBTcampus.org

Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN): Seeks to end discrimination, harassment and bullying in primary and secondary schools.

www.glsen.org

Gay-Straight Alliance Network: Connects student-led gay-straight alliances on secondary school and college campuses to each other and to community resources.

www.gsanetwork.org

International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia (IDAHO): Celebrated around the world every May 17. Commemorates the day the World Health Organization removed homosexuality from its list of mental disorders and calls for the universal decriminalization of homosexuality.

www.dayagainsthomophobia.org

Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG): Supports families, educates communities and advocates for change through 350 local chapters in the United States and abroad.

www.pflag.org

When he finally mustered the courage to tell them, they were furious. They condemned him for “choosing” an alternative lifestyle and temporarily withdrew him from school. He was devastated. “It’s Mom and Dad, and they’re supposed to be there for you,” he says.

Glover turned to G@MIT, an LGBT organization on campus, for help. “I can be there, I can talk to other people, and I can say, ‘You know what? I’m not feeling great today,’ and not be judged,” he says. “My safe space was also my friends at work, was also my mentors.”

He threw his energy into becoming an advocate for change and developed his leadership skills at a five-day summer camp for LGBT youth sponsored by a nonprofit called Campus Pride. “It was a great experience,” he says. “I learned a lot about people; I learned a lot about myself.”

“I want to try to help other individuals ... know that they are loved and cared for before, during and after this whole process,” Glover says.

His parents are still unsupportive, but he remains hopeful. “We crawl, and then we walk, and then we run,” he says. “I’m walking. Jogging, maybe.”

Empowering Families

“The pain that many family members are dealing with is very common,” says Jody Huckaby,

A woman waves a flag at New York City’s Gay Pride Parade in 2009. The celebration marked the 40th anniversary of the Stonewall riots, a series of uprisings stemming from a police raid on a gay bar in Greenwich Village that became a defining moment for the LGBT rights movement. © AP Images/Seth Wenig



executive director of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG).

“For some parents, the first time that they walk through the doors of a PFLAG chapter, it really is a safe place for them to talk honestly and openly about the challenges they’re having around the reality of having an LGBT loved one,” he says. “For us, ‘safe space’ is really defined as a place for everyone in the family to come and talk about these issues.”

A New York City schoolteacher founded PFLAG in 1972 after her son was beaten up for being gay. Today, the nonprofit has more than 350 chapters in the United States and abroad. “We’ve also helped on every continent across the globe to create PFLAG-like organizations,” says Huckaby. Its programs focus on supporting

President Obama congratulates Suzanne Swann, daughter of PFLAG founder Jeanne Manford, at the White House before presenting her mother posthumously with the 2012 Presidential Citizens Medal, the nation’s second-highest civilian honor. © AP Images/Susan Walsh



Revelers with balloons create a human rainbow during San Francisco’s 42nd annual Gay Pride Parade in 2012. © AP Images/Noah Berger

families, educating communities and advocating for change.

“Parents and family members and straight allies have the most powerful voices in the movement,” he says. “If one person is willing to stand up and make a difference,” says Huckaby, “anything is possible.”

Reinforcing Values

Ultimately, Huckaby says, “PFLAG embodies the best of American values — and those are family values. What is it that creates strong communities? It’s strong families.”

Barnett agrees. SMYAL is “helping to make real the promise of America” and fighting for a future in which “all of us have equal opportunity to pursue our dreams.”

“Everyone should be able to live free of fear,” says Huckaby. However, for LGBT youth around the world, “fear is part of their daily lives. It’s the fear of their parents finding out that they’re different. It’s the fear of rejection. It’s

the fear of being thrown out of the house and having to live on the streets. For parents, it’s the fear of rejection from their peers. It’s the fear in the workplace ... that they can’t talk freely about the fact that they have a gay, lesbian, bi or trans loved one. We have an obligation to talk openly and honestly about what it means to live in fear, and do everything we can to eliminate those fears.”

However, notes Huckaby, “just because you pass the laws doesn’t mean that the issue goes away.” Indeed, says Jensen, simple tolerance is important, but “it should only be a way station on the way to ... full inclusion, support, acceptance and affirmation.”

In the meantime, says Vartian, campus, local and national organizations are crucial. “There are people out there who want to reach out and make you feel safe. You just have to get there. You just have to reach out.”