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Do we reject our LGBT children?

Of course we say we're accepting and nurturing, but our own inaction may be putting queer youths at risk when they find themselves kicked out by their biological families. A new awareness campaign hopes to change that.

By Carl Siciliano, executive director, Ali Forney Center

An Advocate.com exclusive posted June 29, 2006

Would you stop loving your child if you knew they were gay or lesbian? For LGBT adults, the answer is, of course, no. But do we really live up to that answer? The fact is, there is a shocking lack of awareness in our community of the problems faced by LGBT youths. As someone who has spent more than a decade running programs for homeless teens, I know all too well what it means when a family cannot accept their child because that child is lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender.



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Numerous tragic situations I have encountered come to mind. There was the boy from rural Delaware who came out to his family at age 15 at a family picnic. His father first tried to strangle him and later that night kicked him out of his home. And the young woman from New York City whose mother discovered she is a lesbian. Her mother attacked her, ripping out a piece of her scalp. And the young man from Florida who told his father he is gay. His father put a gun to his head and told him to get out of the house, that he was no longer his son. I have heard hundreds of such stories and have known thousands of queer kids who have endured the terrors and degradations of homelessness as a result of rejection by their biological families.

It's true that today's teens are growing up in a world where there are many more images of lesbian and gay people in the media and there is a great deal more information about homosexuality available. With Ellen and Rosie and *Will & Grace*, progress has been made. In large part as a result of this increase in LGBT visibility, research indicates that teens are coming out at younger ages than ever before.

But what kind of an environment are today's youths coming out in? We live in a society that remains bitterly divided about whether or not to accept LGBT people. Far too many parents are not willing to embrace their gay, lesbian, or transgender children. In fact, a recent study indicated that 25% of teens who come out experience rejection by their families. And many of these rejected teens find themselves out on the street, homeless and vulnerable. Surveys of homeless youths in cities across our country consistently show LGBT teens making up 25% to 50% of the entire homeless youth population.

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In 2002, I founded the Ali Forney Center in response to this crisis. We are now the largest and most comprehensive organization in the nation dedicated to serving homeless LGBT youths. We offer emergency and transitional housing, medical and psychiatric care, street outreach and drop-in services, and a vocational training program. We do everything we can to duplicate the kind of nurturing and support that teens should receive from their families. Over the past four years, more than 500 youths have benefitted from our housing programs.



Would you stop loving him if you know he's gay?

It's hard to think that parents would ever stop loving their child. Unfortunately, many parents do just that when their child becomes a teenager and tells them he is gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. Many parents throw their teenager out of their home—just for being honest about who he is.

If your child comes out to you, you can feel angry, confused, guilty and worried. Angry with your son or daughter, confused and guilty about what to do and worried about what the neighbors might say or what the people at church will think.

The staff at the Ali Forney Center know this can be a rough time for you and your son or daughter. We're here for you to talk about what you just found out. We will meet with you, talk to you and listen to what you have to say. The Ali Forney Center wants to help you keep on loving your child while you work things out. We don't want any teenager to be homeless.

And if for some reason you feel you can't have your son or daughter remain at home, we can help. Call us. Talk to us.

The Ali Forney Center: It Feels Like Home.

527 West 22nd St. 1st Floor New York, NY 10011 212-206-0574 www.aliforneycenter.org



But we have not been able to do enough. Every day there are more kids needing our help than we have space to accommodate. Many LGBT youths continue to suffer terribly, both from the pain of being cast out of their families and from the danger and squalor of life on the street.

The Ali Forney Center has begun an education and outreach effort in New York City in order to preserve family cohesion and prevent LGBT youth homelessness. We are offering counseling to families of LGBT youths and are reaching out to parents through an advertising campaign that asks, "Would you stop loving your child if you know they are gay?" Using compelling images of parents holding their infant children, we hope to remind parents of the deep bond they share with their children. The thought-provoking campaign, created by Double Platinum, is an important first step in our efforts to make LGBT youths safer in their own homes.

It is tragic that so many youths are forced to experience homelessness as a result of their honesty. But it is disgraceful that the larger LGBT community focuses so little attention and so few resources on the problem. On behalf of the thousands of LGBT youths on the streets of our nation, I call on community members and leaders to make the welfare of our youngest members a priority. We might not be their parents, but these are our kids. We must do more to protect them. And we must come up with strategies to reach

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out to the communities who are often most opposed to us—religious conservatives, immigrants, people of color—for it is among families in such communities that our LGBT youths are most in peril.

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