

LGBT youths in Washington area get their first mentoring program



Brian Taylor/For The Washington Post - From left: Spencer Olson, community engagement coordinator for Metro TeenAIDS; Brooke Taylor, former DC Center intern; David Mariner, executive director, DC Center; Stephanie Stines, project director of Connect to Protect

“Kids see more gay people on TV and think it’s safer to come out, but it’s not reality,” Barnett said. “A decade ago, the average age for coming out was 23. Today, it’s around 13.”

Although most 23-year-olds lead relatively independent lives, 13-year-olds have a lot to lose. Not only are they less equipped than an older person to cope with the emotional stresses of coming out but they also risk ending up on the streets, often not by choice, if their families don’t accept their sexual identity.

Brooke Taylor was 14 when she came out to her family after knowing she was gay for years. Looking back, she thinks coming out at an early age was the natural thing to do.

“Right around the time everyone else became aware of their feelings, so did I,” she said. “Why should gay kids have to wait until they’re adults to have feelings?”

Taylor, now 23 and a recent graduate of Howard University, helped found LYFE Mentors last summer during an internship with the DC Center because she was “flabbergasted” when she saw how little mental health support there was for gay and transgender youths in the region.

“It felt obvious to me that a mentoring program could help lower some of these risk factors, and the city simply didn’t have one,” she said.

When Sean Robinson heard about LYFE Mentors through the DC Center, he knew he wanted to get involved as a mentor. As a professor at Argosy University, Robinson has spent the past several years researching sexual orientation in young adults and evaluating George Washington University’s LGBT mentoring program. The difference between an adviser, a counselor and a mentor is critical, he said.

“Advising is prescriptive. It’s saying, ‘Here’s what you need.’ Counseling is instructive. It’s saying, ‘Here’s how you do this.’ But mentoring is relational, it’s not one-size-fits-all. It’s meeting the youth where they’re at, asking the hard questions and saying, ‘Let’s walk together.’ It’s not easy, that’s for sure,” Robinson said.

During focus groups with local LGBT teens and young adults, Robinson said LYFE Mentors’ advisers learned they’ll have to be strategic and meticulous when pairing mentors and mentees together.

“Just because you pair a young lesbian with an older lesbian doesn’t mean a relationship is going to happen,” he said. “Like any relationship, there has to be chemistry, goals and a mutual understanding about why you’re there in order to be successful.”

No one at the helm of LYFE Mentors pretends that mentoring will end the risk of homelessness or attempted suicide. But by offering an adult to talk to, the group hopes to make a dent.

“Maybe we’re going to the root of the problem,” Mariner said. “To give an alienated, lonely kid someone to turn to who understands what they’re going through — maybe that’s the next step.”