

DAILY NEWS

Church haven for transgenders may lose home

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By Rachel Scheier

"Princess" was sexually abused at 9 by his stepfather. He ran away from home at 13, started work as a prostitute and, up until a few months ago, lived on the streets.

In late September, Princess, 18, who grew up a boy in Jamaica, found Carmen's Place, a shelter in the basement of St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in Astoria for homeless gay and transgender youths.

But a lack of funding and declining attendance at St. Andrew's has forced the church to close its doors, meaning that without a new home, on Jan. 1 the shelter itself will be homeless.

The news was devastating for Princess, who after five long years, had finally found a home. "I don't have to show anything here except who I am," Princess said.

The Rev. Louis Braxton, 50, started the shelter about a year ago to help what one volunteer called "the most marginalized of the marginalized."

"We're a small congregation in a large building," said Braxton, noting the decline in church attendance.

Braxton and the crew of community volunteers who staff the shelter are desperately trying to scrape up funds to find Carmen's Place a new home.

Homelessness among gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender young people is epidemic, particularly in New York, experts said.

Not only are these youths often driven from their homes by family rejection, they are more likely to suffer from the consequences of substance abuse, mental illness and prostitution, according to **Nicholas Ray, a policy analyst with the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.**

A report on the subject released last week by the Task Force said transgender youths - men who identify as women or the other way around - are most vulnerable to such negative consequences.

"Employers don't want to employ them and, in shelters, they often get harassed," Ray said.

Often, the normal experience of simply getting up and going to school or work is totally foreign to such kids, Braxton said.

Braxton and his volunteers provide the youths with counseling and referrals to agencies that offer health care and job assistance.

Carmen's Place, named for a local young former drug addict who turned her life around before dying of AIDS, recently received official nonprofit status, Braxton said. The minister hopes the shelter can raise enough funds to hire a social worker if it finds a new home.

So far, the volunteers have raised about \$30,000, half of what they estimate they need to start, said Marget Ananda, a marketing and public relations freelancer who volunteered to run the shelter's administration after meeting Braxton in an Astoria Starbucks one day.