

# The DAILY NEWS TRIBUNE

## A room of one's own

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By Nicole Haley/Daily News staff

WALTHAM - When Alex was 11 years old he was shipped off to a residential program for adolescents with emotional problems and learning disabilities.

"I was being called a 'fag' every day. I got beat up so bad I should have gone to the hospital," Alex recalls.

His peers routinely harassed and beat him while staff members at the program, he said, turned a blind eye. But Alex, whose parents had been jailed for bank robbery and drug-related felonies, had nowhere else to go.

"It was very hard, I was coming out with myself and learning about myself," says Alex, who only wanted to use his first name for privacy reasons. "It was not accepted to be gay there."

According to a recent report, Alex, now 18, had an experience not uncommon to displaced gay teens across the United States. **The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force** and the National Coalition for the Homeless say gay, lesbian, and transgender youth make up somewhere between 20 and 40 percent of the total number of homeless and runaway youth.

Due largely to discrimination against the population in general, the study contends, "LGBT homeless youth are seven times more likely than their heterosexual peers to be victims of a crime" and far more likely to experience harassment. Negative experiences at shelters and living programs often leave homosexual teens feeling they might be safer living on the streets, says Colby Berger, one of the study's authors and a former administrator of Waltham House.

Waltham House is a group home providing a "safe and supportive" living environment for up to 12 gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youth. The home was cited in the report as one of five programs across the nation offering effective services to gay youths. When Waltham House opened in 2002, it was only the third in the nation catering to the GLBT population. And it is where Alex found a community he felt welcomed into for the first time.

"It was just amazing, you could be yourself without anybody judging," says Alex, who came to Waltham House three years ago. He spent two years there and is currently residing at a pre-independent living program. Alex is learning about life skills and preparing for college.

But Berger said there are still too many teens like Alex coming from difficult circumstances and not enough services like Waltham House to keep them safe. The national report advocates more funding for the federal Runaway, Homeless, and Missing Child Protection Act and goes further to ask that money be set aside specifically to increase aid to programs catered to GLBT youth.

"The program is based on three core values - responsibility, respect and pride," Berger said of Waltham Home. "We hope that all kids have pride in who they are in the world and they get that through the development responsibility and respect."

The report quotes the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services analysis that LGBT youth are more susceptible to mental health issues than their heterosexual counterparts because they live in "a society that discriminates against and stigmatizes homosexuals." GLBT teens are also cited as being more vulnerable to substance abuse and risky sexual behavior.

Alex says that his first residential program fits the profile of those unsympathetic to GLBT issues. In addition to ridicule from his peers, Alex said he also encountered unfair treatment from staff members because he was gay. When he was 14, staff members found out Alex was having a relationship with a 17-year-old male resident. Alex was kicked out of the program and sent to a residential sex offender program, since he was below the age of consent. He said the 17-year-old faced no punishment because staff members did not think he was really gay.

"It was probably the worst experience anybody could ever go through," Alex said of the sex offender program. "You couldn't look at anybody in the eye and you had to keep your head down."

After a few months and four separate psychiatric evaluations, Alex said the program determined he did not belong in the grueling group sessions where fellow residents detailed their crimes. Alex, who the program determined was there on an invalid recommendation from his former residential living program, was assigned individual therapy. It was during one of those sessions he learned about Waltham House.

"I came from basically lock down to freedom," Alex says of his transition to Waltham House. "It was a huge step and it took me over a month to start to get into the groove."

Alex said he made several good friends through the program and learned how to support himself and become comfortable with who he is. He participated in group activities and events and went to the Gay Pride parade. He was given information on preventing sexually transmitted disease, and lessons on banking and apartment hunting. The majority of the staff at Waltham House are gay, lesbian and bisexual, and Alex said it made a big difference for him.

"They could relate to us, and not many staff in a lot of programs can relate to us," he says.

The portion of the study Berger authored talks about training modules for GLBT-friendly programs, with Waltham House as a model. But she said in the long run she hopes there is no need to put a special focus on the gay population and that all homeless shelters and residential programs are safe and positive for anyone walking through their doors.

"Our ultimate goal is to make ourselves obsolete, we want to make sure that every group home, every foster family, every shelter, is safe and welcoming so no young person has to go without a home," Berger said.

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