

Documentary 'While We Sleep' shows plight of local gay teens

Posted by Rachel Dissell
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Akeem Rollins was 14 when he found himself couch surfing through Cleveland.

"I was kicked out because I told my mom I was gay," Rollins said.

It was the first, but not the only time Rollins found himself homeless after his sexual preference caused trouble at home.

At 17, he was again on the streets and in danger of not graduating from high school.

A documentary, "While We Sleep," which opens Friday, shows how folks from Metro Youth Outreach and Bellefaire JCB stepped in, helping Rollins with temporary shelter, transportation, a warm coat and counseling. "My mom and me were able to reconcile, and we have a good relationship now," Rollins said.

The film, which also features the stories of two other local teens, was produced to show the plight of teens who are gay and often end up homeless, said Mika Major, director of programs for the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Community Center of Greater Cleveland.

Filmmakers worked with gay teens and outreach workers to tell stories of living on the streets, of being estranged from family and of coming to terms with being gay.

Metro Youth Outreach is a program of the community center. It works with Bellefaire JCB, a nonprofit organization that serves families and children. Bellefaire has a special program that assists homeless and runaway teens.

Major said the documentary puts a face on the need for outreach to Cleveland's overlooked population of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youths.

"Once these young people are on the streets, it's only [about] 72 hours before they start trading their bodies for sex," Major said she has learned from working with the teens. "If there's one thing we are doing here . . . is shining a light on the lack of services that exist."

A 2007 report from the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and the National Coalition for the Homeless found that between 20 percent and 40 percent of all homeless youths identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. About a third of them engage in survival sex, or sex in exchange for food or shelter.

Major said the community needs a late-night drop-in shelter and transitional housing for these homeless teens. She hopes bringing attention to the issue locally will garner support for such services.

The program's medical director, Dr. Henry Ng, saw more than 114 homeless youths in the center's roving van from March to December 2007. Many were screened for AIDS or given medical attention. The center served about 1,200 young people, ages 14-24, over that period.

Akeem Rollins, now a lanky 18-year-old with dreadlocks and a gap-tooth smile, graduated from Cleveland School of the Arts and attends Cuyahoga Community College with some scholarship help. Rollins said he hasn't yet seen the documentary. He said he is much more comfortable on the other side of the directing chair.

In 2007, he wrote and directed a short play called "Like Dogs for Chocolate," about a young man infected by HIV. It received high acclaim at Fusion Fest, a cross-disciplinary performing-arts festival held in Cleveland.

"I can't stand the way I look on camera," Rollins said shyly. But the cause was one he couldn't turn down.