



Youth outreach program is feted on its first year

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by Anthony Glassman

Cleveland--Recalling the glory days of Higbee's Silver Grille, around 300 people attended a one-year anniversary celebration there for the Cleveland LGBT Center's Metro Youth Outreach program on April 4.

The outreach to homeless youth was feted with a documentary film, *While We Sleep*, directed by Gina Brinker. Among the speakers at the event were Judy Shepard, the mother of slain college student Matthew Shepard, Dr. Henry Ng of MetroHealth, Cleveland LGBT Center executive director Sue Doerfer and Akeem Rollins, a poet and performer who found himself couch-surfing when he was kicked out of his home after coming out to his mother.

Rollins found help through the Metro Youth Outreach program and its allied organizations, and eventually reconciled with his mother. He was one of the teens profiled in *While We Sleep*, which received a rousing ovation at the reception.

"The outpouring of support and care the community is showing dramatically increases the opportunity of success for our young people," said Mika Major, the director of programming at the Cleveland LGBT Center.

The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force estimates 20 to 40 percent of homeless youth identify as LGBT, and at least a third wind up engaging in survival sex--trading sexual favors for a place to stay, food or money.

Traditional shelters are dangerous for gender-variant youths, where they face the risk of assault. There are currently no homeless shelters in northeast Ohio that regularly offer help to transgender people.

Shepard, who was transformed in the aftermath of her son's 1998 murder into a tireless crusader for LGBT rights and safety, spoke eloquently and often with her tongue in cheek, referring to herself as one of 12 registered Democrats in Wyoming.

She, like the film and the other speakers, stressed the importance of protecting youth and providing safe spaces for the next generation to grow.

"We are thrilled that so many people came to this event to learn about the Metro Youth Outreach program as one of the important programs of the center," said Doerfer.

Metro Youth Outreach has staff members and volunteers that go out to areas where homeless youth congregate to offer health services, case management and other assistance. It is a partnership between the Cleveland LGBT Center, Bellefaire JCB, MetroHealth, Cuyahoga County and other organizations.