

Public Libraries: Serving LGBTQ Homeless Youth

By Samantha Sinanan.

- What is the connection between homeless marginalized youth and public libraries?
- How can the public library become a safe space for LGBTQ homeless youth, battling multiple levels of oppression?
- How can we as the library community be active agents of change and inclusion?

Participants at Saturday morning's BC Library Conference session **Public Libraries: Serving LGBTQ Homeless Youth** were fortunate enough to hear **Julie Ann Winklestein**, PhD and veteran public librarian from California, challenge us to make our public libraries safe and inclusive spaces for LGBTQ homeless youth.

Julie Ann's research drove her to take up this challenge by connecting with homeless LGBTQ youth and conducting interviews, trying to understand who these youth are, and hoping to dispel typical librarian stereotypes and create a support community for what she identified as a population in need. Her stories brought members of this marginalized community to life and brought many of us out of our comfort zones, reminding us that perhaps our public libraries are not quite the safe spaces we need them to be. The conference theme: Are we there yet? comes to mind.

Julie reminded us that gender is social, and gender and sexual identity need to be treated with openness and respect. She reminded us that language is important. Language helps shape our ideas, impressions and attitudes and when we use positive language, we help create openness - we invite people in, rather than pushing them away.

Julie had us examine what barriers to service provision exist in our libraries.

- What kinds of assumptions do we have about people when they walk through the door?
- Who are we targeting when we design our libraries?
- Who is welcome?
- Do our policies apply equally to everyone?

She touched on the needs of these youth. In many cases they are using libraries as sanctuaries; away from the constant pressure of being judged; away from the public. They are heavy readers, users of the internet and rely on facilities such as washrooms. Many of these youth crave adults who care about them and librarians and library staff can create a supportive environment without pitying or patronizing. We don't need to solve their problems - we just need to provide safe access to our resources.

Julie left us with a list of long and short-term suggestions for what the library community can do to create inclusion and access. For starters we can make the needs of this population a natural part of our offerings - rather than a special program - we can normalize homeless services and LGBTQ services in an effort to reduce the stigma of homelessness, to reduce the stigma of being different. We can examine our assumptions about people who walk through the door. On a very practical level we can become active change agents by contacting a homeless shelter or an LGBTQ resource centre and making connections - making our services known. We can visit homeless shelters and make sure people know where the library is and what services are offered. We can remember that these youth are patrons with information needs and it is our duty as ambassadors of the library to do our very best to help them.

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