

Shelter from the Scorn

Queer teens stuck in intolerant foster homes, and the LGBT group that would give them safe haven

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By Andy Bromage

Dave's been cracking up all night at the hilarious sketches being drawn for a game of Pictionary. He lets loose a hearty wa-ha-ha-ha when his opponent passes off an amorphous blob as a flower pot. But his mood turns dead serious when asked about life in the group home.

It's horrible living there, Dave says, "just horrible."

The privacy level is below 1 percent. Two years ago the staff outed me in front of the whole house by saying I went to this gay event. When you're in the bathroom, kids throw open the door at any time. When I went on dates with my ex-boyfriend, they would follow you around. They'd walk right behind you."

That would be hard for any average kid. But Dave's an 18-year-old out gay teen, living among decidedly straight peers at a state-run group home for kids with sexual behavioral issues. Dave's been bounced around group homes almost his whole life, ever since an abusive relative landed him in state custody at the tender age of 6.

He's hardly alone. Somewhere around 90 gay, lesbian and transgender teenagers are in the custody of the state Department of Children and Families, scattered around Connecticut in privately run group homes and with foster families. The conditions range from supportive and welcoming to harassing and homophobic, according to True Colors, a Manchester-based LGBT advocacy group that runs a mentoring program for many of the queer kids in state care.

Lots of teens in the system are abuse victims. Others were kicked out by parents for being queer.

The night I met Dave, True Colors was hosting "Gayme Night" at a house near Trinity College in Hartford. For four hours, the teens got to hang out together with their mentors, eat pizza, play games, watch TV and dance.

Then it was back home — for some an accepting sanctuary, for others a place of fear and harassment.

True Colors has a solution: a group home just for queer teens.

The concept is relatively simple: The less time kids spend defending their sexual orientation from alarmed peers and staff members, the more they can focus on the issues they're in treatment for.

"Our gay kids have to fight about being gay every damn day — name calling, constantly on guard, constantly waiting for the next shoe to drop," says Robin McHaalen, executive director of True Colors. "If they're in a home where they can just be, other stuff surfaces. A lot of times when a kid goes to a gay group home they think it will be perfect

and it won't. Now they have to deal with loss, abandonment and other issues."

Straight kids might benefit too. Jodie Simpson, a DCF social worker, says some straight teens simply aren't ready to deal with gay house mates.

"In one house there is a kid who is very religious, believes it is against everything in God's plan to be gay," Simpson says. "Hopefully in the end tolerance will be exercised. But it takes a long time for kids that age to get there and it puts other stuff on their plates when they are not there for that reason."

Connecticut doesn't have such a home but Massachusetts does: Waltham House, a 12-bed facility outside Boston for LGBT youth ages 14 to 18. Connecticut sends some kids out of state to Waltham House, at a cost of \$91,000 per kid per year. Two live there right now.

True Colors was close to establishing the state's first home for queer teens last year when the private agency that would have run it backed out for financial reasons. True Colors had identified a home in Mystic, in the district of an openly gay lawmaker and near a lesbians-of-color community.

"We had all these plans to wrap the community around these kids," McHaelen says.

The state sees Waltham House as a good model for queer kids in foster care but isn't convinced there's sufficient need here for something similar. Group homes must remain 85 percent full to break even.

"Opening a program and closing a program a year later is not a good thing to do to a service provider," says DCF spokesman Gary Kleeblatt.

Or to a kid. But McHaelen says with close to 100 kids in the system, there's more than enough to fill a six-bed house. True Colors and DCF are both studying numbers to determine if enough kids exist and what kind of start-up money is required. McHaelen says they'd need around \$200,000 to get it going. Kleeblatt says times are tough — the state's facing a \$6 billion deficit over the next two years — but if the project makes sense, the money will be found.

Whatever happens, McHaelen hopes it's quick. Stories like Dave's are all too common in group living settings and make the best case for reforming the system. To that end, we interviewed a half-dozen queer kids who are, or were, in foster care, the oldest 19, the youngest 15. In some cases, names have been changed for the kids' protection.

Danielle, Age 18

The following is excerpted from Danielle's recently written college admissions essay and from interviews.

"As of this day, Danielle is now committed to the Department of Children and Families." My heart raced. I knew that I was no longer going to be able to be with my family. "Hi, Danielle, I am Joe. I am going to take you to the DCF office to find where we are going to place you tonight."

As I walked out of the courtroom in tears, I stared at my parents in disbelief. Joe and I went on the elevator. He patted me on my shoulder and said, "It's okay. We will find you a good foster home." As we arrived at the DCF office, Joe placed me into a room and said, "I will come back once we find you a placement."

"Danielle wake up." As I stretched and wiped the drool off my cheek, I looked at the time. It was nine o'clock. "We have found you a placement. It is going to be downtown at the shelter."

"Well what do I do about all of my books and stuff? I don't have any clothes for tomorrow for school."

"It's okay Danielle. We will write you a voucher for Wal-Mart and you can purchase some clothes until we can get some from your parents. We will also see what we can do about your school books." Later that night I cried myself to sleep because I knew that my life had changed forever.

My family is comprised of my half-brothers, my step dad and also my mother. The reason why I do not include myself is because I have always been the black sheep. Growing up a lesbian, the only girl in my family, and not knowing my father, made me the outcast since birth. Without my permission, my school social worker "outed" me as a lesbian when I was in seventh grade. When my parents found out I was a lesbian, abuse became a lot more severe. I would hate going home on vacations because I knew I would either get "prayed over" or beaten just because I was gay. The abuse I suffered for many years led me to become a foster kid my freshman year of high school. This was a huge struggle for me.

I have been placed in 20 different foster homes and changed school systems four different times during high school. Learning how to become responsible and independent was a huge obstacle and also a fear. I had to learn how to take public transportation. My school work suffered due to the constant moving; I always forgot a school book at the previous foster home. I still relied on my parents for the things that foster parents could not provide for me. I still had my title as the black sheep.

Some foster homes were nice and decent. Other times they wouldn't have food. The last place I was at, they never had food in the house.

I got placed in a group home. That's where I fell in love with my girlfriend. I'm still with her now. You're not supposed to have relationships in the house, which I understand, but the staff would say you can't come within two feet of this person.

Even though I was a lesbian placed in a group home, a lot of staff members weren't aware of my sexuality. When I went in — I'm really masculine — they said, "Do you want to be a boy?" I said, "No, I'm a girl who's really masculine."

My girlfriend left a card I had written her under her bed. I was upstairs laying down and a staff member comes in and says, "Look what I found." The letter was like, "I love you so much. I'm happy you're my girlfriend." It was a one-month anniversary card I had written her. She read it out loud to the other kids. I thought, "Oh my God. Are you

serious?"

I developed trust problems with higher authority figures like social workers, different foster parents and friends. I slowly lost the bond with my younger brothers and my family members. My trust issues and voicing my opinion became a huge problem.

I am now eighteen years old in a stable foster home that I have been in the longest since I entered foster care. I now attend a magnet high school, the only school I have been in for more than a year. The relationship with my parents is still the same, but I have learned how to cope with it and to become independent. My grades improved when I moved in with my foster parents. I am happier. I no longer have the fear of being responsible or independent. My whole four years of high school has been a challenge, from start to finish. I know what it takes to become successful and handle obstacles at the hardest times. I no longer fit the title of black sheep. I now have a family that I fit in and loves me for me.

Eric, Age 19

My father had so much money — shit money. He went bankrupt and lost his job and broke his legs. It was drugs. He was a construction worker. He lost everything.

I moved in with my grandmother. That was the whole coming-out period.

In sixth grade, I used to get picked on and never knew why. I met this kid in school and thought nothing of it. He was cool. One day I go to the bathroom. He kisses me after I used the bathroom and I slammed his face into the sink and broke his nose. I didn't know what to do.

I was kicked out of school for 12 days and started wondering: HmMMM. Did I enjoy that [kiss]?

From then on people made fun of me. I was in Waterbury schools. They called me Goth boy and witch boy [Eric is pagan].

My grandmother didn't like my father's addiction to drugs. We were kicked out of my grandmother's house.

My father pulls a crack pipe out on me. I was all tears. We were just sitting there and he says, "I know I shouldn't be doing this in front of you." The last thing I said to my father was "I'm going to take a walk. I'll see you around. I love you."

After that, I saw [venereal disease] on myself and went to the clinic. They removed it and now it's gone. After that situation happened, a nurse was nice to me and friendly. She helped me contact DCF.

I met my foster parents, a lesbian couple. I was living with two white lesbians in the suburbs in Terryville.

My senior year, I was walking home to my foster parents' house after school and this kid in a truck asked me something disgusting and I didn't respond. I just kept walking. He followed me, threw a bottle at me and screamed "nigger" and "faggot" right by my

house. I went and told my parents and they said something to the school and True Colors came and formed a big old conference with the school on gay minorities and gay rights and about how everyone should live equally. It was interesting to see how they responded to it. I didn't get a lot of heckling like I thought I would.

I'm out of high school now, going to music school at Hartford Conservatory for jazz and pop vocal. Living on my own. It's frightening to be out on your own by yourself. I get depressed sometimes but you'd never know it. I'm not going to lay there and do nothing.

Dave, Age 18

My group home is just horrible. I went to the True Colors conference two years ago and the staff at my group home outed me in front of the whole house by saying I went to this gay event. I've been there two and a half years. It's horrible. The staff is not allowed to hug you and tell you it's alright. I lived in a group home out of state for three years, where I met my first real boyfriend. Now I'm at a group home around here. Five boys live there. I could see it getting shut down after I leave.

The privacy level is below 1 percent. When you get someone new on your call list, you have to talk on speaker phone. If they can't meet them in person, they want to hear how they talk.

There's no privacy in the bathroom. Kids throw open the door at any time. Knocking on the door when you're in there.

They still ask me questions I consider to be indecent.

When I went on dates with my ex-boyfriend they would follow you around. They'd walk right behind you. They don't do that for a boy and a girl. You get no privacy.

Nate, Age 15

I lived in two foster homes, then a group home. I spent nine months in a foster home and didn't like it. They misplaced me. I was 11 years old. Everyone else was 15 and 16. It was depressing because I wasn't with my parents. I moved to another foster home for five years. I got used to them. I called her Mom.

When I moved from Puerto Rico, I didn't speak English. My [birth] mom was on Section 8 [assistance]. We lost our house. Section 8 kicked us out of Mom's apartment. I stayed over at a friend's house. The school was noticing that and they called DCF.

I was depressed. I couldn't see [my birth mother] for more than three hours. I used to see her once a month, then eventually once a week, then every day. I got so excited and so happy.

Now she knows about my sexuality and now she sees a different me than she did back then. She doesn't care now [that I'm gay]. She doesn't want to see me kiss a boy, which I understand. So I have to do it away from her.

I came out this year as soon as I entered high school. I was so scared to tell my foster parents because they didn't agree with it. I'm scared to tell them that I'm this.

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