

Homeless, LGBT youth rally for change

By Shamecca Harris, 365gay.com

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I had never been to a rally before Monday. Nevertheless, Monday night I trekked on a subway adventure to the Rally to Protect Homeless LGBT Youth at Union Square. Three transfers, two trains and one bus later, I had reached my destination.

A small crowd gathered within a larger crowd of New Yorkers stopping for cigarette breaks in Union Square Park – typical, apathetic New Yorkers turning up their iPods to drown out the world.

I warily worked my way through the mass of people, looking for a sign that I was in the right place. Within seconds, I had found it or rather, them – a handful of picket signs scattered among a group of teenagers. I was definitely in the right place.

Still, I did not know what to expect. Prior to making my way downtown I had spoken with Marti Gould Cummings of Broadway Speaks OUT! about the goals of the rally: What was it hoping to accomplish?

“Awareness,” Cummings said. “We’re hoping to bring awareness and educate people on the importance of taking care of our youth.”

By 6:30 p.m., hundreds crowded around a small stage, straining to hear the opening remarks amidst the hustle and bustle of downtown Manhattan.

“This is not an easy place to have a rally,” Hollywood jane-of-all-trades Sandra Bernhard joked, taking a moment to pause for police sirens.

Bernhard quickly shifted to a more serious tone.

“These kids have been rejected by their parents and their communities. It’s up to us to take care of them do some damage control,” she said. “We are their advocates.”

City Councilman Lew Fidler followed Bernhard. He roused the crowd with some startling numbers.

He said, “3,800 children will sleep in the street tonight. One-half to one-third of them are LGBT....One hundred percent of them are somebody’s baby.”

The crowd reacted with deep sighs and shaking heads. If awareness was the goal, Fidler hit it on the nose.

The numbers hung around in my head long after the councilman moved on. 3,800?

That's 3,800 kids much like myself stuck on streets of New York. New York, "the city that never sleeps" and I wondered – How would they?

I imagined what it would be like to spend the night on the streets of New York. I would never make it. I hate riding the subway after dark, much less sleeping on it and the fresh smell of urine in the morning isn't exactly my cup of tea.

"There's no place like home," I thought.

While that may have been true for me, for 3, 800 kids, there is no place at all. Life has been unkind to them and their realities are cruel. The unconditional refuge of home has been taken from them simply because they are gay and lesbian, bisexual and transgender. They are nobody's baby and it will take years to heal the wounds of rejection. "This is supposed to be the greatest city in the greatest country in the world," Councilman Fidler added later on. "This is 2010. We should be ashamed of these statistics."

I sure was.

Lt. Dan Choi turned up the heat and the volume next. The combat veteran who fought on the frontlines of the Iraq war, told the crowd that he is willing to fight "on the frontlines of the war for justice; the war for love; the war for truth."

"Brave," I thought.

"Truth" had cost so many of these kids everything. They have been abandoned by their communities for simply telling the truth – revealing to their families that they were LGBT.

Still, Choi's words spurred them into a fire of applause. These kids are in a losing battle with truth, but they hadn't lost the war.

Choi concluded his speech with some passionate words of encouragement. "I am somebody and I deserve full equality," he yelled, with the crowd chanted along.

FIERCE representative Desiree Marshall fueled the fire of Choi's speech. She criticized the absence of resources for homeless LGBT youth and called on the audience to hold their city council members accountable for their failures.

"It is our duty to fight. It is our duty to win," Desiree recited, while encouraging the crowd to join her. "We must love each other and protect each other. We have nothing to lose but our chains."

Several other politicians and LGBT rights advocates took the stage to speak about the grave injustices that face homeless LGBT youth. But perhaps the most powerful speeches came from the personal testimonies of the youth themselves.

Jayvon Roberts was the last of three homeless youth to tell his story. Bullied by his adopted mother for his sexual orientation, Roberts left home in his senior year of high school. For several months, the teenager struggled with the pressures of homelessness, as well as an eating disorder and cocaine addiction. Alone and desperate, Roberts sought refuge in New York City, where he was able to find help.

Today Roberts is a part of Green Chimneys Transitional Independent Living program and is on his way to escaping the “homeless rut” he had hoped to avoid.

“I am free from my past and pain,” he said. “I am changing into the person I want to be.”

Carl Siciliano, executive director of the Ali Forney Center for homeless LGBT youth concluded the rally with these words:

“A few weeks ago a journalist was giving me a hard time about this rally. He wanted to know who we were rallying against. The city council? The mayor? The president? We’re not really rallying against any of these.

“When I think of why we are rallying I think of the thousands of young people I have come to know over the last 15 years of doing this work. I think of the kids who were beaten violated, hurt in their homes. I think of the kids told to put their belongings in garbage bags and being cast out onto the street. I think of young people scared and alone in the street with no where to go at night, all because they were LGBT. I think of arranging funeral services for the young people who were murdered on the streets at night. I think of sending staff to the morgue to identify the murdered body of Ali Forney.”

I think that says it all.

After the rally, I made my way back uptown. Three transfers, two trains and one bus later I had reached my destination. Home – a place I had just learned 3,800 youth would not see tonight, a place they may never see for many years to come.

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