

## **What does Stonewall, LGBT Equality and Diversity Have to do with Sexual Violence Prevention in LGBTQ youth?**

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I have followed Samantha's (name has been changed) story for the last three years. Samantha has been an active and vocal participant of the Wingspan Anti-Violence Program's (AVP) Project Q program. I have seen Samantha blossom into a confident, vibrant leader in the Tucson Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) community, many times taking lead in special Wingspan projects and events. Samantha has participated in every Project Q module and has been seen to pass along the information she has gained to her peers and older members of the community.

Samantha is a transgender, a person of color and has had to leave her family home due to their lack of understanding who Samantha is. From my experience in working with LGBTQ youth, it is these factors that make her extremely susceptible to sexual violence. I recently overheard her talking to several of her peers about the Stonewall revolution. I was very proud as she explained the details: police brutality, corrupt government, trans phobia, homophobia, a disenfranchised community takes a stand and so on.

This moment confirmed for me the importance of discussing LGBT equality in the prevention of sexual violence in LGBTQ youth communities. The Wingspan AVP addresses intimate partner violence and sexual assault prevention and education by examining the intersections of oppression. It is necessary to discuss how ageism, racism, classism, homophobia, trans phobia, misogyny facilitate oppression and violence of individuals. The LGBT movement has been an important part of the Project Q curriculum from the very beginning. Samantha felt a sense of belonging to a larger family. A family that understood her struggles and would not judge her, instead supporting her gender expression and allowing her to build skills that would help her be successful in life. Many LGBTQ youth, like Samantha, often feel irrelevant, and even disposable. Absolutely no control over their shelter, finances, education or bodies.

Samantha's family forced her to leave their home when she began to let her hair grow and began to use make-up. One day she walked into the building and I saw that she had cut off her hair. She explained that the situation in her home was unbearable and she cut her hair to see if it would help matters improve.

Sadly, Samantha's story is not unusual for the youth community that Project Q targets. Many are youth who are living with friends or carry their belongings in backpacks, never knowing where they will be at nightfall and may rely on dumpsters for their food. Many have dropped out of school because they are bullied and ridiculed for their sexual orientation or gender identity. Many have absolutely no support network, no parental figures to help with life skills, self-esteem and safety awareness.

Studies show that LGBTQ youth are at a higher risk for sexual violence and for engaging in behaviors that may put them at risk for sexual assault. Having little or no control in many aspects of their lives, LGBTQ youth may engage in substance abuse and risky behaviors.

Teaching LGBTQ youth about the struggle for LGBT equality builds protective assets. Engaging in the movement facilitates relationship building, mentorship and civic participation. Youth identify can model their individual growth with the LGBT movement, seeing parallels in oppression, violence, disfranchisement, voicing ideas, demanding justice and then giving back to community. As AVP staff facilitators discuss historical timelines and highpoints in LGBT history, youth participants regain pieces of identity, personal sovereignty, self-value and self worth.

Today, Samantha is working on earning her high school diploma and receives tutoring through the Wingspan youth center program. She has also held a job and moved into her own apartment. Samantha has become a visible leader in the community and takes great pride in helping others. “Project Q has made me more aware of sexual health and safety. It has given me a place to call my own and discuss important topics that are going on in my community regarding sexual violence. My favorite Project Q workshop was “Diversity” because it helps me realize that change has to happen in society as a whole.”