

# A Straight Woman In a Gay World

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Nicole Sheppard

**I** thought I would catch your eye with that title. But it's true. I've been working with young people for nearly 20 years, and during the last 12 years with mostly gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning youth (GLBTQ). I have been called "fag hag," "honorary lesbian," "closeted lesbian," and "the girlfriend of girlfriends," but that's because I love what I do and it shows.

I am the director of a foster care program that is predominantly gay (staff and residents) and somehow I fit in. Most teens and staff in the typical program are straight, but in my program it's the opposite.

Am I uncomfortable, you might ask? No. It is no different working with this population than any other I've worked with.

I chose social work as my vocation because I like people (and for the most part they like me back) and I wanted to make a difference. I was taught that every person has dignity and that we should treat people the way we would like to be treated. As a social worker, you work with an individual or a family, not a race, religion, gender or age. As a social worker you are not supposed to discriminate. All prejudices are supposed to be left at the curb in helping the clients address their needs, and it shouldn't be any different if the clients are gay. It is our ethical obligation as social

workers to treat people fairly and equally. When we fail to do so, we violate the most basic norms of our profession.

Even though I strive to treat every client with dignity, I have encountered my share of difficulties. Sometimes youth have wondered whether they can trust me. Can a straight person understand the needs of a gay person? Can a straight person create an environment where gay people can be themselves?

When I first came to work at Green Chimneys, I was confronted by gay youth who were suspicious of me. They thought that I didn't have a clue about their lives or how to handle them. They tested me to see if I was worthy of their time and trust. They were surprised that I could come back at them in the same way, and still maintain my position as a social worker. When it became clear that I could handle myself and not be "shocked" by their behavior—which is what many gay youth expect from staff—I guess I passed the

*Nicole gives advice on how straight staff can work effectively with gay clients.*

test. Soon after, instead of superficial stuff, I was getting the intimate and detailed conversations that a social worker is supposed to be privy to.

Naturally, there will be common ground between gay staff and gay clients, just as there will be common ground between an African-American staff member and an African-American youth. But does this mean that common ground due to sexuality or skin color will assure a perfect match in working together? No. Differences will always exist between people, but they shouldn't matter if you are true to your profession and understand that your heart plays a big role in how well you work with people. Most people—and most children and youth—can tell right away if you are sincere and trustworthy.

If you're not feeling confident, be honest about your inexperience in working with gay youth, but also express your willingness to learn and understand. At the same time, assure your clients that their best interests are always your priority. Most gay youth feel vulnerable. Vulnerability is not powerlessness, but part of being human. If you put your

own vulnerabilities on the table, you have given your clients a reason to make a connection. If you open yourself in this way, gay youth will view you as part of their support system and perhaps even as an ally.

I have always prided myself on making young people know I am in their corner. It is crucial that my clients feel welcome, trusted, and able to confide in me. That kind of trust is fragile and must be nurtured with a great deal of care. Too many of our foster youth have been let down by adults and tend to be suspicious of them. But if you, as a staff member, are sincere and straightforward (no pun intended) in your approach, then a child will respond to you, gay or not.

My experience as a straight staff member working with gay teens has been extremely rewarding. I would never return to working with straight people again. (RIGHT!) All kidding aside, I like what I do and hope that this book will give you greater insight into understanding and working successfully with GLBTQ youth.

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## Think About It

(See pages 13-15 for detailed instructions on leading these activities.)

### **Freewriting prompt. Limit writing to two minutes or less.**

—Think of a time when you had to work, share a room, or closely interact with someone who was of a different race, ethnicity, gender, religion (or who was different in any other way), and you worried about connecting with or getting along with that person. Why did you worry? Were your fears justified? Why or why not? Were you eventually able to connect with that person? Why or why not?

### **Use these questions to prompt individual reflection or group discussion:**

—Nicole writes about “being tested” by gay and lesbian youth. She won them

over through a combination of standing up to them and showing her vulnerabilities. Think of a time a client challenged you in a difficult way. Were you able to get closer to the client? If so, how? If not, why not? Is there anything you would do differently now?

—How confident are you about finding “common ground” with the clients you work with? What would make you more confident?

—Would you have to change your working style to make your agency a gay-friendly place? Why or why not?

—After reading Nicole’s article, do you have new ideas on how to make your agency welcoming to gay and lesbian youth? What are they?