

Training Can Open Eyes (and Hearts)

Carmen Iris Quinones

After spending 16 years at an agency that helped homeless people, I came to work at a foster care agency, Green Chimneys Children's Services, a little over two years ago, as the director of Triangle Tribe Training and Technical Assistance. My responsibility is to train child welfare professionals to work with gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning (GLBTQ) children, youth, and families.

When I started this position, I thought to myself that it would be a short-lived experience—after I trained everyone they would “get it” and then my job would be over.

Boy, was I ever wrong!

I got an earful at my first workshop. People said that gay people were going to hell, that they can't raise children, that being gay is “just a phase,” and that gay people should seek treatment for their disorder. Others were more affirming.

Never in a million years would I have imagined people still feeling this way. Sadly, I realized that a lot of people hadn't “got it.”

Another important thing happened at this time. As I attended more workshops with Gerald Mallon, then the Associate Executive Director at Green Chimneys, I started examining my own personal history.

I am a Hispanic woman in my late 30's, a Catholic, and I have been out of the closet for about 20 years now. I currently live in New Jersey with my partner of six years. I was raised by my grandmother, who was more than 60 years older than I was. She lived in New York City for 40 years but never left Puerto Rico in her heart and soul. The culture and customs of the island were my first education and my first language, then came American customs and English.

I remember being different from all my cousins, who would visit our home every weekend. I was especially different from my female cousins, who wanted to play dress up with my aunt's or grandma's clothes. I had no interest in their clothes, but a great interest in grandpa's ties or my uncle's suits. I would sneak into the room and try on a tie and look at myself in the mirror.

I was around 5 years old when I would sit and watch Eartha Kitt as Catwoman on

Carmen describes how she trains staff to be sensitive to GLBTQ youth.

“Batman and Robin.” I can still remember my first grade teacher—the way she looked and the way I felt when she was around me.

I have since figured out all of my differences, but back then it was very difficult for me to understand what was happening to me.

When I started doing workshops for staff, I became acquainted with homophobia all over again. I learned to observe the audience. I watched for body language, for the way people communicated with each other. I found myself always prepared to do battle, because I never knew how people were going to react to me or to the information.

I found it disconcerting that some participants laughed or joked as I introduced myself or seemed very uncomfortable with the material that was about to be covered. The workshops were mandatory for most participants, voluntary for others. While some participants were very positive about learning how to be more effective with GLBTQ youth, others were either indifferent or downright hostile about having to attend.

What I try to teach is that regardless of your personal beliefs about GLBTQ persons, you can learn to be a more effective practitioner in working with this population. In the absence of clear guidelines and policies, most people fall back on myths and stereotypes that they believe to be true, even if they first learned them when they were teenagers themselves.

Our training begins with some ground rules. First, all questions are welcome. Second, I inform participants that we will not discuss two areas: (1) religious convictions about homosexuality and (2) scriptural interpretations of homosexuality that are

found in the Bible. Discussion of homosexuality frequently gets sidetracked by religious questions, which impedes an open, honest, and professionally-based conversation from taking place. Our goal is to train professionals to work more effectively and competently with gay and lesbian adolescents, not to engage in debates with people about whether their religion approves or disapproves of homosexuality.

We then cover these major areas:

- a review of useful language and phrases for practitioners;
- myths and stereotypes about GLBTQ persons;
- developmental issues and adaptive strategies for GLBTQ children and adolescents;
- gay and lesbian children and adolescents in the child welfare system;
- a review of the coming out process, particularly with respect to family issues; and
- strategies for creating a nurturing environment for GLBTQ youth in the child welfare system.

(See pps. 98-103 for a brief summary of some of these topics. To find out how to receive our training, see the contact information at the end of this article.)

In the last two years I’ve conducted over 150 workshops. It is sometimes a very emotionally draining experience, but it can also be very rewarding. I think the comment of one participant sums it up best for me: “This training has really helped me to see how important it is to learn how to work with all young people. I never really knew very much about gay and lesbian people. This workshop has really helped to open my eyes.”

[Think About It—see next page]

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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 felt ashamed or embarrassed about your race, ethnicity, religion, appearance, or anything else about you. Why did you feel that way? How did it feel to be around others? Were you able to eventually accept that aspect of yourself? Why or why not?

Use these questions to prompt individual reflection or group discussion:

—Some child welfare staff are resistant to the training sessions that Carmen conducts. Why do you think that is? What

can trainers do to reduce that anxiety?

—How well-informed do you consider yourself about GLBTQ issues? What would you like to know more about? What kind of training would you like to receive and in what areas?

—In your view, how well are the needs of gay and lesbian youth met by your agency? In general, do staff help make the agency safe and welcoming? What could be done to improve the way the needs of GLBTQ youth are met? What steps could you take in your agency to empower gay and lesbian youth?

For more information on training seminars for education, social services, health, and mental health professionals, contact:

Triangle Tribe Training Services

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For a comprehensive overview on working with GLBTQ youth, based on the training Green Chimneys provides, see *Lesbian and Gay Youth Issues: A Practical Guide for Youth Workers*, by Gerald P. Mallon, CWLA Press, Washington, DC, www.cwla.org

For additional resources, see the bibliography and resource list on pps. 104-105.