Breaking the Silence

Kristy DeWall was 14 years old in 1992 when her foster mom read the diary where Kristy had confided her fears about being a lesbian. Despite her good standing at the Christian school where she was enrolled and the passion with which she prayed to be “like the other normal people,” Kristy's private explorations resulted in her removal both from school and the home she had hoped would be hers forever. Even her caseworker at the time encouraged her to pray harder to get on the “right path.”

With Kristy’s next placement, her seventh, she found the family she would stay with and continues, to this day, to call her own. She was 19 years old, however, before she began to embrace the orientation that she first recognized nearly a decade earlier when she felt that “something was different” about herself.

But all through the fear and silence of her adolescence, Kristy also carried a small kernel of comfort. It was the memory of a male agency representative who, during one six-month review, spoke up in her defense while her caseworker and former foster parents raged against the idea that she was struggling with her sexual orientation.

“He was the only one who even suggested that I was okay,” she said. “For so many years I didn’t have a voice or anyone to speak for me.”

Although almost two decades have gone by, stories like Kristy’s are hardly a thing of the past. But according to Jody Marksamer, staff attorney for the National Center for Lesbian Rights, Casey Family Programs is at the forefront of creating a culture change as it improves services for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth in care and makes sure they have a way to give voice to their needs and concerns.

“Casey has given these issues a prominent role at the It’s My Life conferences by hosting workshops, bringing LGBTQ youth formerly in foster care to the conferences, and exposing participants to best practices from around the country,” Marksamer says. “It’s a powerful thing when organizations with the level of respect that Casey has puts its weight behind an issue. It’s what those of us working with LGBTQ youth look for.”
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First Steps
To effectively address the needs of its young LGBTQ clients, Casey first set about getting its own house in order. Over the past decade, Chris Downs, director, Practice Assessments and Web-based Tools, has witnessed and helped further the organization’s growing awareness of the importance of incorporating LGBTQ issues and concerns into its internal structure as well as its practice.

Several turning points mark Casey’s efforts to define and support LGBTQ issues for its clients and its staff. These include a 1998 staff presentation that raised awareness of HIV/AIDS. The following year saw the publication of the Youth Sexuality Sourcebook, which addressed gay youth for the first time. Then, in 2000, Casey established its Office of Diversity, which Downs calls a “major watershed.”

“This was the first time that Casey formalized its work around diversity and legitimized its concerns about anti-racism and sexual orientation,” says Downs.

Organizing and Outreach
Two years later, in 2002, Casey incorporated the LGBTQ Leadership Team as an affinity group that now includes up to 30 people who meet through monthly conference calls. Founded by Downs and Vi Schurman, quality improvement specialist, Outcomes and Quality Improvement, Casey created the LGBTQ Leadership Team to promote “an agency culture in which the unique needs of LGBTQ clients (children, youth, and families) and staff are understood by all Casey employees.” The leadership team also researches services and policy matters for field offices, advises Casey on any issue related to sexual orientation, and recruits foster parents at Gay Pride events.

“When we began to recruit at Pride events, attendees were stunned that any organization would invite them to become foster parents,” Downs explains. “The gay community is virtually untapped and there are huge numbers of people who want to foster parent and adopt.”

There are no precise numbers for just how many LGBTQ youth are in care, but 20–40 percent of homeless youth self identify as LGBTQ, according to the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Youth Support Project (GLYS). Statistics from the Institute for Children and Poverty show that as many as 1.35 million young people are homeless each year. Moreover, the March/April 2006 issue of the Child Welfare Journal reports on the results of a one-day public health survey conducted in six states by homeless youth providers. The survey reveals that “in addition to the public health risks young people face merely by being homeless, the risks are exacerbated for those who self-identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual.

“LGBTQ youth are the ones who tend to be pushed away from their homes of origin,” explains Downs. “So looking at the numbers of homeless youth is one of the ways we can infer how many there are.”

Diversity Training
Over the past few years, Casey’s Office of Diversity has implemented several trainings that focus on LGBTQ issues. These are for both field staff who work directly with foster parents as well as headquarters staff whose work has a less direct, but nonetheless important, impact on foster parents and youth.

Angie Mushen, a resource family practice specialist at Casey, works with family developers and other
Casey field office staff members to help them assess their own attitudes and beliefs. Family developers then provide the trainings to foster parents and potential foster parents. Casey’s work with foster parents and youth builds on existing work around identity, particularly racial and ethnic identity.

For example, beginning in July 2006, Casey began to roll out Undoing Racism™, the two-and-a-half-day core training that all Casey staff attend, to groups of 20–40 foster parents through Casey field offices. Facilitated by the People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond, Undoing Racism looks at systemic cultural oppression, including sexual orientation, and helps foster parents learn how to support youth in care as they explore their emerging identities.

Family developers also use components of the comprehensive Casey Foster Family Assessments (CFFA) to help potential foster parents explore their feelings and challenge their assumptions regarding LGBTQ youth. Knowing Who You Are, Casey’s three-part program on race and ethnicity, examines how racial identity is formed and emphasizes the importance of openness and transparency. The organization is also rolling out components of Knowing Who You Are, which underscore the need to create a safe environment for discussing potentially difficult feelings and ideas, to foster parents.

“How well we create a safe place for youth to explore their sexuality depends on the success of the agency to be intentional about its conversations,” Mushen explains. “When family developers can teach foster parents to be more open, it helps keep both them and young people from being caught off guard when they begin to explore their sexuality.”

A two-day training, presented by GLYS and required of all Casey staff, focuses on what it means to be LGBTQ. It uses videos, role-playing, and scene-setting to demonstrate how to create a safe environment for young people to explore their sexual identities. These activities are designed to interrupt displays of homophobia and heterosexism and give foster parents the experience of responding to youth who are revealing their sexual orientation for the first time. The workshop also introduces aspects of LGBTQ culture and gives suggestions for how to help youth connect with their peers. In addition, a portion of the training challenges staff with the often-unexpressed notion that diversity is a workplace issue whose concerns are restricted to the hours between nine and five.

“The workshop is very effective for people in the field, who can make immediate use of it,” says Shawnjae West, a Casey diversity training specialist. “It’s more of a challenge to get our headquarters staff to see the relevance, even though they work
side-by-side with people who are LGBTQ and who also need the support and understanding.”

Starting in December, a second phase of LGBTQ training, Achieving LGBTQ Competency, will help Casey staff move beyond a basic understanding of LGBTQ issues to examine their personal attitudes, biases, and internal beliefs and understand how they impact the work they do with other families, youths, as well as other staff.

“Sometimes body language and silence speak volumes,” said West. “You can’t really support youth and families if you don’t support and empower the people who work with them.”

Listening, Learning, Moving Forward
Casey has also gone directly to LGBTQ youth to learn more about their concerns and how best to support them. In 2004, the organization supported two listening forums, in San Diego, CA and Sacramento, CA, in a series sponsored by the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) and Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund. A total of 13 listening forums were held to bring LGBTQ youth in care together to discuss their stories—their successes, heartaches, and their relationships with foster parents and the system—and come up with ideas for how the child welfare system can better meet their needs. Based on input from over 500 youth and adults from 22 states who have attended forums held around the country, Casey developed an Ansell-Casey Life Skills Supplement specifically for LGBTQ youths, the only life skills supplement of its kind.

Listening forum participants are also represented in the publication, Out of the Margins: A Report on Regional Listening Forums Highlighting the Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning Youth in Care. The report offers insights, resources, and concrete solutions to the many issues LGBTQ youth in care face, and includes an article by Downs challenging child welfare practitioners, policymakers, and researchers to coordinate their work and develop practices that reflect the lives of these young people.

“It is of the utmost importance for child welfare researchers, policymakers and practitioners to work in concert with one another so that each can inform the other,” says Rob Woronoff, LGBTQ program director, Child Welfare League of America. “This will result in a well-integrated system of care in which policies are substantiated by sound social science, and which in turn supports practices that are grounded in credible research and well-crafted policies. Only then will the full force of the system be brought to bear toward optimum outcomes for youth in care.”