

A safe space

The nation's first transitional housing shelter for transgender youths opens in SF, filling an urgent need

By Kevin Fagan | April 21, 2019

Kat Blackburn was a decade into the beatings, rejections and hate that rain down upon transgender youths like herself when she walked into a San Francisco church last year to rest her feet. She was homeless. Churches are supposed to be refuges. This one wasn't.

"They were talking about the LGBT community, and it just got worse as I sat there," she said. "When they said they viewed us as being possessed by demons, I just went cold. I had to leave. It made me feel, like always, that there's no safe space for us."

Now she's found a place where she doesn't have to feel that way.

In a nondescript house tucked into a corner of Haight-Ashbury, 21-year-old Blackburn and four other young people are making history. They are residents of the nation's first long-term transitional living program specifically for transgender homeless young people. It offers them a safe haven from bullying and abuse that they might not find anywhere else.

The three-bedroom Victorian has room for six youths, defined by the program as those age 18 to 24. The fifth just moved in a week ago. The house opened its doors quietly nearly two months ago, and the goal is to let its residents stay two years as they work to unsnarl the damaging effects of what for most transgender youths has been a lifetime of bigotry, poverty and despair.

San Francisco and other cities have had housing or shelter programs for homeless lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youths for more than a decade. But as one of society's most marginalized minorities, trans youths have particular needs that those who work with the homeless have wanted urgently to fill.

Transgender people are discriminated against more than any other segment of the LGBT community — even within the LGBT world itself. It has long been a goal of homeless program directors in San Francisco to create a refuge where trans youngsters can get in off the street, deal with depression or stress, and find a healthy way forward for their lives.

Larkin Street Youth Services, the leading homeless-youth agency in the city, finally came up with the \$375,000 annual budget it needed to rent and run the shelter-housing program. The sixth resident is expected to move in any day.

With its huge windows, neat hallways and sitting rooms, and a kitchen brightened by sunlight, the place offers a built-in placidity. It's in a tranquil part of the neighborhood, where the loudest noise is the occasional passing car, and all around are backyards to match the home's bushy landscaping and towering trees.

"The community and young people have been asking for this for a long time, and we're super-excited about it," said Sherilyn Adams, Larkin's executive director. "With stays of up to two years, we can give young transgender people the time they need to really get stable and move forward. We want them working on their education, employment, therapy, volunteer work, managing their medical care — everything they need to do to be able to have all the things we want for all our kids."

Larkin's Castro Youth Housing Initiative is overseeing the house, which operates with on-site case managers, residential counselors and referrals to more counselors, and advisers from the S.F. LGBT

Center and other resources around the city.

“Unlike their peers in the rest of the LGBTQ community, transgender youths have more medical needs, and they have a whole added extra layer of trauma,” said Christopher Rodriguez, program manager for the trans house. “Many need hormone therapy, surgeries, preparation for surgeries.

“They’re outed more easily than others — a gay man can pass as not gay if he wants to, but generally not someone who’s trans. So they get more attention, and not the good kind. And more violence. That takes a lot of careful work to heal.”

Blackburn said she started dressing as a girl at about age 10 while growing up in Alaska. As she became more aware over time that her gender identity did not match her male biology, and she began presenting that more openly, her dad beat her, and her mother rejected her. She left home as a young teenager, bounced around Northern California and wound up in San Francisco.

“I can’t even talk about the trauma I went through as a kid,” Blackburn said. “I didn’t have people to reach out to. Even as I began transitioning and taking hormones about a year ago, people discriminated against me because my voice isn’t high. They expect me to look and sound a certain way, and even some gay people get mean about it.”

A quiet, self-described introvert, Blackburn prefers black pants and black T-shirts with skulls on them. She sports a shock of black hair swept low over the right side of her face.

“I look like who I am, and what that is is nobody’s business,” she said while scrambling eggs for breakfast. “At least here in this house, nobody gives me any trouble about that. I can try to plan for what’s next — maybe bartending, maybe photography. I’m a good cook and have some training. Maybe something in that.”

Blackburn’s 22-year-old roommate, Bobby Perez, came to the house a week ago — not long after a stint in jail for getting into a fight. Her parents are homeless, and she’s been on her own since 15, crashing with friends or sometimes trading sex for a place to sleep, mostly in San Jose where she grew up. Like Blackburn, she was staying in a Larkin Street shelter when counselors told her about the new trans house.

“I finally got sober a few years ago, and now I just want to get into a rhythm — I don’t want to say a ‘normal life,’ but a rhythm,” said Perez, who has been transitioning from male to female for several years. “I want a regular workout routine, a job I can come home and complain about, travel. I guess you could say a better life.”

Perez is a quick-witted street survivor with an incandescent smile, but a sliver of pain in her eyes speaks of the work she has ahead. At one of the last shelters she was in, someone left tampons on her bed to taunt her. Sneers and snipes usually came, too. She’s had to fight bigots. She’s had to be tough.

“Now that I’m stable in a safe place, it’s about, ‘Who am I?’” she said. “I want to see where I can go. I just have to find a passion now.”

Gregory Lewis, executive director of True Colors United, a national advocacy nonprofit for LGBT homeless youths in Washington, D.C., said the San Francisco program is “very important.”

About 40% of the nation’s 1.6 million homeless youths are LGBT, and 3% are trans, according to True Colors United. Though there have been great strides toward tailoring services toward them, the efforts are falling short.

Two influential surveys by Lewis’ organization, in 2012 and 2015, showed while 70% of lesbian, gay and bisexual homeless youths experience harassment and bullying, the figure is 90% for their

transgender counterparts. Likewise, 75% of LGB homeless youths are rejected by their families, but it's 90% for trans youths.

“After you've been rejected, discriminated against by friends, family and society, to know you have a safe place to sleep and have access to all the things kids experiencing homelessness need, from housing to counseling — that's phenomenal,” Lewis said.

In San Francisco, trans numbers are higher than in the rest of the nation. The city's last biennial Homeless Point-in-Time Count, conducted in 2017, found that 49% of San Francisco's 1,363 homeless youths were LGBT — and 10% of those were transgender.

“A lot of the homeless trans patients I see would rather be in a car or a tent camp than in a shelter because of the discrimination and violence they face,” said Dr. Jacqueline Newton, co-founder of the Gender Health Center in San Jose, which specifically serves transgender people. “What Larkin is doing is truly great. There is such transphobia from lack of exposure on many people's parts to trans people, a lack of understanding of what being trans means. We really need this.”

Everyone in Larkin's trans house is expected to spend at least 30 hours a week taking training or classes of some kind, working or looking for a job. If they have income, they give 30% of it to the house managers, who then save it to give back to them as a launching fund when they leave.

“I want them to thrive and be independent, to get a job, learn core life skills,” Rodriguez said. Those life skills can loom large for young people who have probably spent a good portion of their lives on the streets, in shelters, or on strangers' couches.

“Little things can be big for some people, like something as simple as learning how to make rice, recycle, make your bed. Not knowing those things can hold you back, make you not able to keep a roommate,” he said.

Rodriguez smiled as he watched Blackburn smooth down her bedspread, carefully placing her favorite cat-shaped pillow just so at the head of the bed.

“I want them all to leave here being proud of themselves,” he said. “They need that. They deserve that.”