

“Saving the Future of Pride”

By Tara Babal

“Equality means more than passing laws. The struggle is really won in the hearts and minds of the community, where it really counts.”

– Barbara Gittings, prominent LGBT activist

March of 2020 is a moment that will be remembered through history. The Covid crisis took the world by storm; all of a sudden, unemployment shot up, a lack of financial support was felt throughout the country, and businesses and schools were being shut down, causing everyone to be sent home. This particularly affected students, who were taking their first steps into independence in the real world only to find out they were to stay home. “Home” is a powerful word; for some it brings a sense of comfort and relief, but for others it means a place where they are never accepted, or even where they are in danger due to their sexuality or gender identity. Understanding how the LGBTQ+ community is being affected directly psychologically, and looking at the numbers, is so crucial in order to prevent any more harm caused during this crisis. This pandemic has caused a heavy weight on the minds of LGBTQ+ youth, as they were forced to go back to their biological families rather than stay with the family they found along the way. Being with others who are like-minded could be liberating, bringing on a sense of freedom that many don’t get to experience with their biological parents. University being online only pushed these kids away from these safe spaces, and there’s a serious lack of urgency on the issue that needs to be addressed.

First, it's important to recognize the importance of spaces where LGBTQ+ youth can feel accepted. While school clubs may just be a way for people to bond over their favorite hobby, or mingle with each other, LGBTQ+ spaces create a home, a sense of genuine family for people who struggle with their identity and homelife. These spaces act as a place where they are able to talk about their relationships and feel understood rather than judged, providing them with a sense of freedom they often cannot find at home. Families are supposed to provide unconditional support, but many in the LGBTQ+ community are not fortunate to have that, so they must seek a new form of family to support and love.

The concept of a "found family" is strong in the LGBTQ+ community, and it is essentially a group of unrelated people that form a bond based on these shared, sometimes-traumatic experiences. It is liberating to find others who can relate to one's experiences and build connections with people they have never found at home. The pandemic disrupted so many of these "found families," as found families were forced apart and students were often sent back to unsupportive homes. This causes more damage than one might think. A study by Gutierrez shows that at home "39% of queer adults have faced rejection from their birth families. Found families can fulfill survival functions as well as emotional ones' ", it takes the idea of what tradition family values are and transforms then into a new idea that is more open. Found families "becom[e] not a biological happenstance, but a group of supportive people providing unconditional support" (Gutierrez). This idea of a "found family" is so much more than friendship, it's a promise to each other of unconditional care and acceptance, to offer each other what biological families won't. Universities being unable to operate in person and holding all clubs and classes online just adds another issue due to the inability to access online meetings in a

safe environment, or not providing these services at all. In most cases, nothing is done to address these concerns.

Pride flags and community spaces may seem insignificant, or it may be looked at in a negative light to be waving a rainbow flag, but these features provide protection to those in the community by showing that they will not be judged for being who they are. Many students who are still reliant on their biological families are searching to break free from the cycle of hate—to grow into the adult they strive to be. Homophobia runs through this country, so there's judgement towards Pride and a lack of understanding that there's more to Pride than a party. Pride is and an event that is celebrated every year all throughout June. It's a celebration of solidarity in the face of those that seem to be against the community. Unfortunately, due to the pandemic, Pride has been cancelled in 2020, and it's uncertain for 2021 due to the ongoing crisis. While Pride may seem just as a festival to others, a way to party in glitter and rainbow, it's far more important than that. As Konnoth write, "Queer gatherings are a rejection of queer isolation: of hiding in the closet, of believing oneself to be alone one's identity, of fearing that embracing one's truth would result in physical harm," and those in the community seek shelter—emotionally and physically—from strangers at Pride. At Pride there will be parents with signs that say "free mom/dad hugs" in order to supply those who are in unsupportive families with physical affection and the information that there is someone that is looking out for them. Support groups are another method of contact between youth in the community because of the lack of support in their families. The absence of care towards these students connects to why there has also been a high number of deaths of LGBTQ+ students (Konnoth). There's such a desperation for that unconditional love that they received from their found family that many young people are taking many risks to see them. Many catch Covid in the process of working to earn enough money and

reach out during this pandemic in order to find safety and validation—to find their real home (Salerno).

Many universities may not be providing sufficient emotional support due to the focus being on academics this year, but there have been a number of virtual spaces that have filled that position. One of the many virtual spaces that were created in this time was the Q Chat Space, and while its purpose was to allow students to connect with one another, its priority was to study the effects of the pandemic on LGBT youth as they were ripped away from their found families. Since GSA's may be held over zoom, this space is completely online and is text based in order to protect the identities of those involved, acting as an extra safety net for those in dangerous situations. The Q Chat Space is a “national online LGBTQ+ center offering 10 90-minute, professionally facilitated, synchronous chat-based support groups for LGBTQ youth (aged 13–19 years) each week” while to examining how these students are holding up during the pandemic (Fish).

Because of this online space that was facilitated in order to keep the environment protected from intruders, this study showed an improvement in their emotions simply because of their ability to communicate with others who are in the same situation as they are. It was validating and it was a place where they could feel freedom in the confines of their house. This study only proved that this was the type of support that was necessary in order for these individuals to connect to others and handle their emotions with those who understand.

LGBTQ mental health in the student population is very specific, and looking at this issue involves a level of connection that not many people can relate to since it is difficult to comprehend why families will reject their children when it is their role to accept them. To further

prove that there is a mental health crisis amongst LGBTQ+ students within the global pandemic, it is critical to look at the numbers. In a study that involved 477 LGBT identifying members of the community between the ages of 18-25, responses showed that “nearly half (45.7%) of LGBT college students have immediate families that do not support or know their LGBT identity,” and “approximately 60% of sampled LGBTQ+ college students were experiencing psychological distress, anxiety, and depression during the pandemic” (Gonzales). It is clear that the LGBTQ+ community experience emotional and psychological trauma due to being stuck with their biological with no physical outlet since there are many restrictions on going outside; additionally, those relationships that were formed with people away from home were put in a place where they do not find as much comfort in them due to being physically away. In a study provided by the Trevor Project, “25.5% of those ages 18–24 reported having seriously considered suicide in the past 30 days” (Czeisler et al., 2020). For comparison, “11.8% of those ages 18–25 reported seriously considering suicide in the past year in a 2019 survey” showing the rate more than double due pandemic-related trauma (SAMHSA, 2020). This is significant to identify how hopeless the student population is feeling in a time where they aren’t able to connect with their peers and found families.

These suicidal thoughts were all due to a lack of feeling like they belonged; they felt outcasted at home, with “35% of LGBTQ youth report[ing] feeling much more lonely since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic compared to 22% of cisgender/straight youth” (The Trevor Project). There was such a surge of loneliness due to the stay-at-home orders that although physically they were safe from Covid, mentally they were unsafe to themselves due to their biological family.

These numbers don't lie, and there is a serious issue with a lack of care and education towards the LGBTQ+ student community. They need help and support from their school in times like this, and there's plenty more to be done. These emotions that they were facing by themselves were often overshadowed by the school's need to fulfill academic requirements. There was a push for normalcy, to be able to get back into daily life with in-person classes, but that level of normalcy will not be able to come back if there isn't any counsel to be offered. If schools cared so much about the success of their students, they should try to understand that a healthy mind is quite significant to their success in their academic career, and then their future, and make greater efforts to support LGBTQ+ students.

On the other side of things, universities do have specific criteria that need to be met in order for someone to pass their classes and also to stay enrolled in the university. There are many expectations for those who attend a university and they are made aware of those in the first week of school, even during remote education. These standards were held up all through the pandemic and it's important for students to realize that these will not go away despite not being on campus or in the classroom. However, because of the physical distance that remote education brought, these online classes can also create an emotional disconnect between the board, clubs, professors and the students attending. Being remote was safe for everybody involved, but it did not give them the chance or have the ability to create those connections in the classroom with others around them, which can be a big reason for the high number of students needing that extra support. Especially when classes become in-person again, it can be a stressor for students who are coming out of quarantine for the first time in a while. Mental health can be described as an invisible illness, something that while one may seem okay on the outside, internally it can tell a completely different story so it's difficult for universities to understand the student's

perspective all through this past year, especially if there's little to no interaction with them. The misunderstanding of the student's emotions further proves universities lack of care towards the issue that remote learning does take a toll on LGBTQ students as they carry the burden of homelife on top of academics.

From the university point of view, there should be more of an open embrace of mental health and the guidance counselor team should be playing more of an active role on campuses, as it is crucial to show the campus that it is okay to not be okay, and that there are people who are trained to help on campus. It is significant to reach out to them, and a useful method could be to do daily mental health check-ins along with the Covid check-ins that are required by students, or random check-ins with members of the guidance counselor team. This will not only break the stigmas that come with mental health and create a more open environment to discuss just these issues, but also give those higher up in the university more of an insight on how the student population is handling the situation. Those results would be given directly to those on campus, and with someone reaching out to those who may be more at risk, it will guide the students who struggle to advocate for themselves in order to receive that treatment from either a professional, a guidance counselor, or an advisor.

Daniel Howell is an LGBT icon and mental health activist who works hard with the organization Young Minds, a charity focusing on the mental health of those in the UK, but his voice speaks across the world. Howell recently did an interview with the Guardian called "If Young People Aren't Supported it's Going to Screw Everybody," which wraps up the situation quite well regarding how the effects of no support from a young age sticks with people until adulthood. With no education about how to help young people with their mental health or teaching them to advocate for themselves in working towards mental health treatment at a young

age, it can only cause more harm in the future and cause severe damage that could be difficult to reverse. The way that schools are providing mental health breaks— movie nights, days off, and stuffed animals—are not enough. He states that “if you want to be a functional human that can rise to the challenges of your life, you need to understand how to be the master of your mind,” which includes the importance of reaching out and receiving that external professional help, even if it is from a teacher or one of the online sources talked about earlier. Becoming emotionally intelligent is almost impossible without any resources, and fear to reach out if there are any provided. Howell also touched on the topic of LGBTQ+ students in the pandemic. He says that rather than just “token investments from the government,” there needs to be a cultural shift to “actually understand and prioritize mental health,” with a focus on prevention rather than cure. “Particularly for young people, it’s about intervening for the few people that are at the point of crisis,” he says (Marsh).

The “prevention rather than cure” is significant, as mental health, when treated, and is seen as a disease that can be fixed with medicine, when in reality it is deeper. When mental health conversations are on the table, time is not taken into account, it is not seen as the dark haze in front of someone’s eyes that can prevent people from moving forward in life, but more of a bump in the road that can be recovered from with ease. With mental health diagnoses it takes a lot of time, and money, to figure out what the problem is and the proper treatment for the diagnosis. And while medicines can be used as a treatment, they are not to be used without an analysis from a professional, especially because, financially, there is a lack of affordability in therapy and receiving that diagnosis. Howell’s interview only amplifies the absolute need for an emphasis on preventative measures for young people at an early age, before it becomes too late and their lives are shifted more than they should have been.

As someone who attends the University of Pittsburgh- Bradford it was quite significant to see how much of an affect remote learning, and online events were taking a toll on those students involved in Pride Alliance. Pride Alliance is the campus's GSA, which is run by students, as all campus clubs are, but this year the stress of online academics mixed with remote clubs seemed to take a toll due to lack of in-person interactions. All throughout the semester there was a heightened awareness of being at home for those off campus, worrying about parents being near during the meetings due to unaccepting family. While there was some comfort brought during the weekly meetings—a discussion or a casual conversation to help members relax for a night—there was a level of stress to ensure that everyone was included, and it all fell onto the executive board to provide the sense of home and comfort. While university clubs are all student run with little-to-no interference from the advisors, it showed that this semester was more difficult to keep the space interactive and safe as it would have been on campus, especially with the events the executive board had set up. Students who did attend took advantage of the space being provided and they were able to feel the stress of the week melt away even if it was for just the hour that the club runs, and it seemed it was the one night a week that helped them escape from the stress of academic and home life, but with more interest from the school about the member's mental health, or offering additional assistance, it could have been more of an open space.

Mental health awareness comes with a large number of stigmas that seem to degrade its purpose of providing true help for those in need. It is more than just a feeling of sadness, it plays an active role in someone's life, especially in a time filled with financial uncertainty, academic stress, a toxic home life, and safety restrictions. The mental health of students is always put on the backburner, and it is time to actively talk about it in order to come to a better solution.

Focusing on positive mental health has become one of the main points during this crisis. Even though it is brought up constantly, it is continuously overshadowed by simplistic messages about breathing and meditation when there is more needed. Too many lives have been lost due to Covid and suicide this year, and in order for these students to be given proper guidance, it's time to speak up and essentially demand it in order for change to occur and help be provided.

LGBTQ+ youth are put in a vulnerable position anytime they are home with a toxic family; there's fear and anxiety that builds, and with a pandemic that has brought on so much uncertainty, causing so many to be forced inside, it's had a lasting effect. Schools cannot fix everything, and they have a standard to keep up academically that cannot be tarnished due to remote education, but what they can do is talk more honestly about mental health and offer more methods from the counseling department to help their campus. GSA's—of course—are a great way for LGBTQ+ youth to find others like them and form bonds; any way to help create an emotional connection to those who are struggling is so important in how they will be able to slowly recover and manage their emotions in a healthier way, but it should not fall solely on those in charge of the GSA.

Treating mental health is tricky; it's stressful and can be difficult because of how much time it can take, but universities have the resources to boost the safety of their students, and education to provide for them. If they nip it in the bud, it can prevent any harm in the future. Saving the future of Pride and all it represents can only happen when there's solidarity on the issues at hand with those outside of the community. When there's a fight for what's needed, the LGBTQ+ community has carried on for so long, but without the support of our peers—and our schools—it's a task that would be impossible to fulfill.

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