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Supporting Our People: Prism hosts Dreams of Hope youth performance group

June 22, 2009

"I get so verklempt when I introduce these guys," said Jeff Freedman of the Pittsburgh chapter of Prism, drawing laughter as he used the Yiddish term for being overcome with emotion. "This is what courage is all about."

Jeff was introducing Dreams of Hope, a nonprofit creative and performing arts youth group that recently performed for an audience of Bank of New York Mellon employees. Ranging in age from 14 to 19, the youths perform at businesses, schools, churches and other venues, using the arts to educate people about lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) issues. All performance material is written by the teens, with the guidance of professional artists, and based on their life experiences.

The program began with the youths using plastic tubes in all the colors of the rainbow as instruments, producing a diverse array of rhythms and tones by "playing" them with different parts of their bodies. Forming a circle, each member took turns reciting words or phrases illustrating the danger of labeling or judging a person based on a single characteristic. A solo musical performance and several skits that followed entertained while reinforcing the importance of looking further than one's sexual orientation.

The tone of the presentation turned more sober as the youths delivered a series of statistics about LGBT teens, who face a significantly higher risk than other teens of suicide, running away from home and missing school due to excessive bullying.

A candid question-and-answer period followed the show. The teens said they attend a variety of schools across the region, including [CAPA](#) (Creative and Performance Arts) High School and public schools. One student is being home schooled – "in eighth grade, when I told my mom I was gay, she thought it would be safer," she said – while another stopped attending school due to the discomfort of not fitting in and has recently earned her GED.

The youths have big plans for the future, some in arts-related fields, some not. Their goals range from working in the fashion industry to serving in the Peace Corps to becoming a pediatrician.

The group provides an important outlet for the youths, said Susan Haugh, who founded it six years ago and serves as its artistic director. "It's a very hard time for them, going through this age period," she said. "If they can't be open, this is a way to express themselves through the arts."

[Learn more about Dreams of Hope.](#)

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