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Young performers transform struggles into Dreams of Hope

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by Laura Kingsbury

No one ever said growing up was easy. But for many GLBT youth, enduring their teenage years poses the challenge of coming to terms with their identities in a society that rarely embraces diversity.

In attempt to break through this barrier, 12 Pittsburgh area youth have combined their talents to create a supportive community educating thousands about GLBT issues.

Now in its sixth season, Dreams of Hope is a group of 13- to 21-year olds that travels to colleges, businesses and health care facilities to present a performing arts show. What started as a small-scale community project of a handful of youth performing four times a season has grown to 18 shows for a projected 4,000 people this year.

"It started as a way for them to creatively express themselves, but by the end of the first year it was obvious the power it had to educate," group director Susan Haugh says.

Benjamin Altshuler, 16, agrees that while he joined the group at the request of his friends, like many of the members, he has since realized how the performance can really spread acceptance.

"To be an activist, to be the voice that needs to be heard, is my oldest dream," he says. "Dreams of Hope is exactly that. Sure, it may not be the picket fencing protests, but it's not supposed to be."



Instead, Altshuler says the performances provide people with an avenue to really think about the issues in a way that doesn't force them to put up their defenses.

Fellow group member Midori Fox, 16, expresses a similar message. "I strongly believe that you can teach people more through entertainment than talking alone," she says. "I am doing something with the help of others that I wouldn't be gutsy enough to do on my own."

The performances include songs, poems, skits and other interpretive performing arts pieces, all written and developed by the youth with the help of several professionals from the Pittsburgh community, Haugh says.

One such segment is group member Kaity Hunter's song "Let Me Be Me," which she says is her personal story of breaking free from restricting stereotypes based on gender, sexual orientation and skin color.

"I thought it would be a good idea to join to maybe give me some insight and some form of acceptance of myself and be able to use my gifts," Hunter, 17, says.

Despite their young age, the youth seem confident in their expressions, even if this confidence came as a bit of a surprise, as it did group member Devlin Kimball, 16.

"I was never really the performing type of guy," Kimball says. "Normally, I would be working backstage; so this was my first time actually performing something, and not just that, but something that we as a group had created."

In addition to performing, the group members personally address the audience in a relaxed, informal question-and-answer session.

While not every question or bit of feedback is positive, Haugh says about 99 percent of the questions come from audience members genuinely interested in understanding GLBT issues.

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