

A HOUSE IS NOT ALWAYS A HOME: AN ORAL HISTORY OF LGBTQ YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

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In a recent study completed by National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, of all of the youth who are homeless, as many as 40% of those youth identify as LGBT. Often, when youth disclose an LGBT identity to their families, conflict erupts at home. Homeless youth most often cite familial conflict and intolerance of their identity as the primary reason for their homelessness.

I began this project expecting to hear a series of very similar stories. I expected to find LGBT adults who had experienced homelessness in their youth after coming out to their parents. I imagined a scared adolescent sitting at the dinner table, telling their parents he or she was gay, and having his or her parents be unable or unwilling to accept this new information about their child. This is not the trajectory I encountered.

What I found instead were wildly varied stories of how queer youth homelessness comes to pass, and how homelessness was defined and redefined differently by each person I interviewed. From these stories comes a broad definition of homelessness, one that makes a clear distinction between a “house” and a “home.” Often, even while housed, the individuals I spoke with did not always feel that they were safe, loved or welcome. As Matt stated, “I was still homeless even after my foster parents took me into their house.”

Most of the individuals I spoke with have transcended their initial experience of homelessness, but not all have been so lucky. The following are accounts of intolerance, abuse and rejection, but also of independence, perseverance, and determination.

Note: All comments from the author are italicized, and the beginning of each story is delineated with the interviewee’s name in bold.

I Spent Most of My Childhood Hiding

Samantha: I slept with boys first. I guess I was curious about sex, about sexuality. Probably, I wanted attention and affection, or maybe just to feel good. I slept with a few of the guys in my high school, but none of them were very interesting to me.

When I met Donna, I immediately realized I was gay. I saw her and I felt like I'd been run over by a train. A big gay train. [Laughs.] She was a waitress at the Italian restaurant that her family owned. She was talking to another coworker when I saw her the first time. I have no idea what they were saying, because it was in Italian, but I couldn't stop watching her. It was her voice, the way she moved. Mmm, she got my motor running! When she came over to take my order, I asked for her phone number. She didn't look like any lesbian I had ever seen, but I figured I would take a chance. Lucky for me, she was interested. She'd never been with a woman before, either, but we hit it off.

We dated in secret for about a year. We were both worried about how our families would react. Her family was traditionally Italian; my family was Seventh Day Adventist. She came out to her family first, and much to our surprise, her parents didn't have a problem with it. Donna's coming out experience was encouraging, so I decided to come out to my parents, too. That was my first mistake. [Laughs]

Cadyn: We never really talked about it, but my mom knew that I wasn't straight and that didn't sit well with her. She has a keeping-up-with-the-Jones mentality. She's a southern Baptist who tends to be very set in her ways, yet she understands the mentality of New England. We are very open-minded in New Hampshire, and although it can be a very red state, everyone is also pretty open in terms of LGBT rights. My mother can pretend that she's okay with me being queer on the surface, but underneath her intolerance just steeps. You get the vibe from her that everything is okay, but when doors are closed she'll be quite outspoken.

Eventually, I just admitted I was a lesbian because I was tired of hiding

something that everyone knew to be true. When I brought Kael home for the first time, my parents were excited. “Oh my God, it’s a boy!”

They had no idea that he was transgender.

Religion can play a major role in families. Many LGBT youth shy away from religions that have a negative attitude toward homosexuality, which can escalate conflict within a family.

Rebecca: My mom is an extremely conservative Mennonite. There wasn’t much of a Mennonite population where I grew up, so our family wasn’t completely separatist, like many Mennonite communities. I was sent to public school, which was almost more difficult than living in a Mennonite village, because my family was so different from the other kids’ families. Although my mom uses some basic technology, she is very traditional in terms of dress and morals. She doesn’t believe in divorce, doesn’t believe in sex before marriage, and she certainly doesn’t believe in same-sex marriage.

Growing up, she and I were often at odds. I asked her too many questions about religion that she never seemed to be able to answer. I hated being so drastically different from the other kids and I didn’t understand why I had to wear full-length dresses to school every day. Clothing was a major source of contention between my mom and me. I had to be exempt from most of my Physical Education classes in school because I wasn’t ever allowed to wear pants or shorts, and my dress was too restrictive.

By the time I was in high school, I was fed up with my mom’s rules. I had a secret stash of pants in my room that I kept hidden from her. I hid a few pairs of pants under my bed, and I would sneak them out in my backpack so that I could change when I got to school.

One day, the school nurse called my mom and asked her to come pick up my brother, who had caught the flu. I was unaware that she was in the building and she saw me in the hallway. She was so furious that I was wearing pants that she pulled me out of school for the rest of the day.

When we got home, she made me take off my jeans and she cut them up in front of me. She told me I was immoral and that only sluts wore pants. We were in a screaming match when my dad came home. He sent me to my room so that he could talk some reason into my mom. Afterward, he came into my room and talked some reason into me. [Laughs]

My dad was really the peacekeeper in our house. He was Mennonite too, of course, but he was quite progressive. It didn't bother him if I wore pants, or if I wore makeup. Sometimes when my mom wasn't home he would let me put on my brother's shorts and play football with the neighbor boys. He was rational enough to know that I wasn't going to go to Hell for cutting my hair or for wearing jewelry.

My dad was the most wonderful, understanding person on the planet. I could talk to him about anything. Somehow, he could take all of my mother's religious nonsense and all of my youth rebelliousness and create an atmosphere where we could both be happy. When he died, my world shattered.

He had a heart attack when I was 15, and I still miss him every single day. I really think that my mom and I could have found a way to live with one another had he not passed. After he died, my mother became even stricter. She clung to religion like a lover. It was like she took all of the love she had for my father and transferred it to God, and by the time she was done there was none left over for me. She doted on my brother, who was not only devout, but the only boy in the family. She just had no patience for me.

Not all conflict for LGBT youth starts with coming out. Many other factors come into play in familial relationships, and a history of violence and abuse can lead to a higher likelihood of being removed from a home.

Matt: I had a very turbulent childhood. My parents got divorced when I was very young, and I don't remember my father at all. They both used drugs and drank frequently, so the level of stress, conflict, and violence was always high. After the divorce, my mother, brother and I moved around

a lot. I never felt safe or stable because of how often we changed location and because of the men that my mother brought home. By the time I was 12, I had attended 15 different school districts. My education was sporadic, to say the least.

I spent most of my childhood hiding from my mother's drunken antics. She would take out all of her anger out on me. I would frequently get beaten, thrown against walls, punched, and kicked. Even though we typically lived in an apartment, no one ever called the police, even though I know that they could hear the screaming.

Robin: When I was 14, I found my first group of butches, and they were much older than me. They asked me directly if I wanted to be a butch or a femme. That's just how things were: there weren't any other options in those days. I told them that I wanted to be a butch. These butches took me out to buy new clothes and get my hair cut. It wasn't safe to shop for clothing in the men's department alone as a butch, but there was safety in numbers. I got my first flattop hair cut that day, and I loved it. I finally felt comfortable in my own skin. The problem was that I still had to go home to my family.

It Never Felt Like Home to Begin With

Samantha: I was 17 when I came out. Donna and I sat my parents down on the couch and I told them I was a lesbian. My mom burst into tears. She sobbed about how she was a failure as a mother. My dad stood up and walked toward me. For a minute, I thought he was going to give me a hug. Instead he slapped me across the face so hard I fell to the floor. He told me to get out and that he never wanted to see me again.

Donna and I left. I didn't take anything with me.

I cried and cried on the way to Donna's house. Her mom said it was okay if I stayed there for the night, but I wasn't allowed to stay in Donna's room. I slept on the couch until her parents were asleep, and then I crawled into bed with Donna. That was my second mistake.

Often the support of one parent is enough to keep an LGBT child at home. However, in single parent homes, or in homes with a one-sided parental power dynamic, the risk of rejection is higher.

Rebecca: I only survived another few months at home after my father's funeral. We had a major fight when my mom found a CD in my room. She believed that the only music that was acceptable was hymnal, and even then, that hymns should be a cappella. She said she wouldn't have the Devil's music in her home and threw the CD away. Looking back, I can't help but laugh: she called me a Devil worshiper for listening to Enya. [Laughs]

I did a lot of normal teenage things that my mother viewed as rebellious. The climate in our house became one of imminent explosion. In a lot of ways, it became a power struggle of who could be more stubborn. In the end, I think we both lost.

I was 16 when another woman in the community mentioned to my mom that she had seen me downtown holding hands with a girl. Weeks had passed since my girlfriend and I had been able to hang out, as I was almost constantly grounded for something or other, so I was completely blind-sided when my mom came into the house screaming her head off. I was in my room, doing my homework and I heard the front door slam. My mom was yelling, but I couldn't make out what she was saying. Within seconds she was in my room with a cardboard box under her arm. She started picking up my things and throwing them into the box, all the while screaming at me.

“You're a filthy slut and that's all you're ever going to be! You are a sinful, lustful, Devil-worshiper!”

I had no idea what I had done wrong. When I asked her what I'd done, she screamed, “Mrs. Cantwell told me all about your shameful homosexual perversion! I won't have a filthy tramp under my roof. Get out of my house!”

I had never even been kissed, let alone had sex. I certainly wasn't a slut, but there was no arguing with my mom. I grabbed the stack of jeans and a box of makeup from under my bed, and shoved it in my backpack. My mom continued screaming horrible things at me and told me how I was damned to eternal Hell. My brother sat back quietly. I don't think he agreed with my mom, but he didn't intervene, so he took her side by default.

Mennonites have a powerful culture of shunning. The idea behind it is that if you isolate a person from the group it will modify that person's behavior enough that they will repent and return to the community. It is also supposed to keep the person from being a bad influence on the group. By shunning me, my mom was limiting the "damage" I could inflict on my brother. The rest of the people in our church took my mom's side. I guess they thought that shunning me would turn me into a chaste, heterosexual woman. Boy, were they wrong!

Cadyn: My mom had been looking for a reason to kick me out of the house since I was sixteen. She constantly threatened me, "Oh, well, you're gonna get kicked out if you do this or that."

I had graduated high school when I was 17, and by the time I was 18, I had worn out my welcome. Right after my birthday, she told me to leave. I packed up and stayed with some friends.

In the fall, I began classes at New Hampshire Technical Institute. I really liked the curriculum, and I met some interesting people. I had wanted to go to the Art Institute of Chicago, but NHTI was all I could afford. While I was attending NHTI, I met Kael through a mutual friend and after we started dating he decided to move down to Concord to be closer to me.

Shortly after I had introduced Kael to my parents, they ended up finding employment paperwork for him in my car during a visit. (Why they were going through my car, I don't know.) The paperwork had Kael's birth name on it. They were outraged and said I was trying to lie to them and that Kael wasn't who he said he was. I sat my parents down and told them, "I met

him as Kael, and he's been a boy as long as I've known him. That's the only way I see him. If you can't accept that, it's fine, but you aren't the ones dating him, so I don't see why this is an issue for you."

My dad has been fantastic with Kael since then. My mom pretends nothing ever happened.

Homelessness doesn't always occur because of familial rejection. Statistically, LGBT individuals are less likely to complete their educations because of issues of bullying, discrimination and a lack of financial support. Without an education, obtaining a job is incredibly difficult: without a job, acquiring housing can become a problem.

Kael: I played a parental role to my younger sisters my whole life. My mother struggled with drugs and alcohol, and I was the permanent babysitter while she was out on the town. After high school, I got a chance to escape and attend the University of Maine. I was nervous about leaving my sister alone with my mom, but I figured it was my chance to get an education so I could get a good job and be able to help my sisters with school when the time came.

School was great for me. I was introduced to an LGBT community, and quickly realized that I was a boy trapped in a girl's body. I changed my name and started dressing as a boy. My mom couldn't care less; she never really paid much attention to what I was doing anyway.

I dropped out of college during my sophomore year because my mother had drained my financial aid from my bank account. I had been studying business because I thought that would be my best option for getting a job after I graduated. I didn't want to be a business major: I wanted to study marine biology. [Laughs.] It just wasn't in the cards for me.

I was forced to move back home for a while. During that time, I had to watch my younger sisters, and once again I played the parental role that neither my mother nor her husband could. Her husband was verbally and emotionally abusive to my mother, my sisters and myself. I realized that being back in the house with him was a bad situation, so I decided to

stay with Cadyn, my partner, for a while and get out of the house before I became too involved in the situation.

When I left without as much as a job lead, my mother and stepfather called me a failure and harassed me about not properly supporting the family. They seemed to ignore the fact that I had been sending them any extra money that I had, and providing them with as much as I could while I was in school.

For youth who have experienced abuse at home, sometimes the chance to leave isn't seen as disastrous, but rather an opportunity to escape a bad situation.

Matt: My mom dated a series of guys, each one worse than the last. Most of them hit her; all of them hit my brother and me. When I was lucky, they ignored me.

Child Protective Services didn't get involved until I was 12 years old. I got home from school one early fall afternoon, and I could smell alcohol before I even opened the front door. My mother saw me across the living room and immediately started screaming at me. I had no idea what I had done wrong, but before I had time to run she was pushing me and had me pinned against the wall. She started punching me in the stomach, knocking the air out of my lungs, and then she pulled back and went for my face. The last thing I remember before waking up on the floor was her fist flying toward my left eye. When I woke up, my mother was gone and I was able to get out of the apartment and across town to my aunt's house. My aunt saw my recently blackened eye and immediately took me to the Montpelier Police department.

The police asked me what had happened, and recorded my story. They went to the apartment, but my mom wasn't home. My aunt said I could stay at her house, and that was good enough for the police. They never arrested my mom and they never pressed charges. They didn't even try to go by the apartment again and talk to my mom. It's like it never even happened.

I stayed with my aunt for a few weeks, but she had her own kids to deal with so she sent me back home all too soon. When I got home, my mom pretended like nothing had ever happened. We never talked about it.

Shortly thereafter, we moved into a trailer. One day while we were there, my mom passed out in a drugged daze, which wasn't uncommon. Her then-boyfriend was in a bad mood and gave my brother a beating, and I was afraid he was going to kill him. I threw a lamp at his head to get him to stop, and of course, he came at me instead. I ran outside the house, and around the back of the trailer. He followed me, screaming. I was faster than him, so I managed to get back inside before he could catch me and I locked him out of the house. I called 911.

The police showed up within a few minutes and they took my brother and me into custody. They didn't arrest my mom or her boyfriend. A caseworker met us at the police station. My aunt was able to take my brother in, but she couldn't take both of us. The caseworker sent a desperate appeal to the schoolteachers in my district, stating that if they couldn't find a place for me to stay, I would have to transfer to another school. I was placed with my 7th grade Spanish teacher and her husband for a few days.

Since my mom's boyfriend hadn't hit me, the caseworker wanted to put me back with my mom. I told her that if I had to go back, I would kill myself. They decided to investigate further and keep me with my teacher for a few months more.

Robin: I remember clearly coming home after my day out with the butches. My new appearance did not go over well. I walked into the house and my father immediately told me to leave and never come back. It never occurred to me to try to go back home and tell them that I wasn't a lesbian. I had been passed around by my father and brothers as a sex object throughout my childhood, so I relished the opportunity to get away. There was so much incest and abuse in that house that it never felt like home to begin with.

I Was Just a Kid, I Didn't Know How to Survive on My Own

Rebecca: When I left home the night the my mom had kicked me out, I didn't know where to go. I didn't have too many friends: everyone at school thought I was weird because of the way my mother made me dress. Like me, the girl I had been seeing wasn't really sure about her sexuality. She and I had actually broken up the week before my mom kicked me out. My one close friend, Felicia, lived in a house that was already quite crowded with kids, and I was worried her family would call CPS if I told her I was homeless. I didn't want to live in a foster home and I couldn't think of anyone who I could stay with, so I slept in the park that night. I was mad at my mother, but at the same time, I remember feeling incredibly free as I lay under the stars that night.

The next morning, I washed my hair in sink of the park restroom facilities and I went to school. I was so naïvely optimistic that first day on my own. I ate the school lunch and it didn't occur to me until much later that it would be wise to ration food throughout the day. I was only a little hungry by dinnertime, but by the next morning I was completely ravenous. I didn't have any money, so I had to wait until lunch to eat again. As I devoured a plate of cafeteria spaghetti it occurred to me that it was Friday and I wasn't going to be able to eat again until I went to school on Monday. I think that's when I started panicking.

When school let out that afternoon, I realized I needed to find a way to eat. Fast. I took the city bus downtown and then I walked to St. Vincent de Paul. It was the only soup kitchen in the area, and I figured I could at least get dinner there over the weekend. I wanted to blend in, so before I entered the building I put on my traditional dress and bonnet. When I walked in, every eye was on me.

Maybe it was because of my dress, maybe because I was young, or maybe because I was clean the director of the kitchen came up to me and asked if I was a volunteer. I shook my head and whispered that I was hungry. When he asked me how old I was, I lied and said I was 18. Even though my mom had been the one to kick me out, I knew I would still be called in as

a runaway if I told him my real age. He sat me down at one of the tables to read scripture to me. After he read a few passages, we prayed. At the end of the prayer he did something with his hands and said something about a ghost. [Laughs] I had never been around Catholics before, so I said what my mother had taught me: “Thank you, O Lord, I am at peace.”

The guy was definitely expecting me to cross myself, but he didn’t say anything about it and told me I could go grab dinner. The food was terrible, but I was hungry, so it seemed like the best thing I had ever eaten. When you live in a constant state of hunger and survival, you learn to eat just about anything.

Samantha: Donna’s parents got up at an ungodly hour and flipped out when I wasn’t on the couch. Her mom came into Donna’s room and pulled me out of bed. She said she still liked me, but that I couldn’t stay with them.

There I was, standing in front of Donna’s house at 5am. I wasn’t allowed to go back home. I called my ex-boyfriend, Tim, on my cellphone.

He answered, “What do you want, Samantha? It’s 5am.”

I asked if he wanted to get back together and he said yes, so I went over to his house. I snuck in through his bedroom window and hung out until I heard his parents get up, and then I snuck back out. I stayed with him for a few weeks in that fashion. Donna and I would get together during the day, and then Tim would sneak me into his room at night. I would leave before his parents got up and no one was any the wiser. It worked out pretty well for a while, but I knew I couldn’t keep staying with Tim without sleeping with him. He threatened to tell his parents if I didn’t put out, so I did. I really didn’t have a choice: I either had to keep dating Tim or end up on the streets.

I felt really bad about sleeping with him, so I decided I should tell Donna. I loved her and I really wanted to be honest with her. She was so heartbroken that I had cheated on her that she dumped me. Without

Donna, there was no reason to stay in town. I had heard that there were a lot of lesbians in San Francisco, so I walked to the highway and I hitchhiked there.

I didn't know anyone in San Francisco. I didn't have any money. My parents had shut off my cellphone. When I started asking for money from people on the street, someone told me that there was a shelter down on 13th street. That's when it really sank in that I was alone.

I met another dyke at the shelter. She was real good looking. [Laughs] She took me under her wing and showed me the ropes. She told me that if I wanted to survive I was going to have to turn tricks. I told her there was no way I was going to be a prostitute, thank you very much! I only held out for about a week.

There are many ways to survive when living on the streets. Some turn to shelters and soup kitchens, as Rebecca did, others engage in survival sex-work or theft. As a result, drug use is often high. Arrest is a constant threat and reality for many homeless individuals.

Robin: It was hard to be 14 and living on the streets. After my father kicked me out, I hitched to San Francisco and lived in the Castro for many years. I had my own park bench and knew that area inside and out. Being homeless in the Castro back then was scary. I was just a kid, I didn't know how to survive on my own: everything was fucking scary. There was a whole group of homeless queer kids there, so we made our own communities and took care of each other. There is still a whole lot of homelessness in that area, actually. Fifty-two fucking years and it hasn't changed.

In the process of surviving, I acquired a quite a resume criminal activity. I got arrested for pimping, multiple sexual deviancy cases, grand theft auto, and probably a slew of other things that I was too high to remember. I was not the kind of butch that had a job: I was a street butch.

There was a sort of routine to it all. I would get arrested at the bar where

us butches would meet up with our femmes. The cops would raid the bars and arrest us for sexual deviancy. In other words, us butches weren't wearing the minimum of three women's clothing items. It was the law back then: you had to have three articles of female clothing on, which to this day I don't understand. I figured out the obvious clothing items like a bra and panties, but what the Hell is the third article of clothing? I had no idea then, and I still don't.

When you're arrested all the time for just being yourself, you kind of stop caring about the law. I was 17 the first time that I stole a car. A few friends and I wanted to drive out to the Atlantic Ocean. We stopped at churches along the way and got food coupons or gas coupons to keep us going. We would also do little day jobs in whatever town we were in to earn money, because we were trying to avoid resorting to stealing.

It was in Alabama that they finally nabbed us for stealing the car. I agreed to a plea bargain that essentially said that the state of Alabama would send me back to California with the guarantee that I would not return for eight years. It was one of the best outcomes that I could have imagined for being charged with grand theft auto!

There were a lot of butches in San Francisco doing the same kind of stuff. Once you found a way to survive and got used to being arrested on a regular basis, you were okay.

Many homeless individuals resort to criminal activities and drug use as a coping mechanism. However, even the smallest resources can make a huge difference. Cadyn and Kael avoided many of the issues that Robin encountered, because they were fortunate enough to have a car.

Cadyn: Kael had been couch-hopping while he was looking for a job. I couldn't afford to live in campus housing, so I had been staying with him and his friends. I ended up having to have my tonsils removed and I wanted to make sure I had a stable, clean place to heal. My parents said I could stay at their house after my surgery.

I was only supposed to be at my parents' house for four weeks. Week three my mom made my dad ask me for money. Kael and I had just bought all of the medication, paid for surgery, and bought groceries for ourselves so that it wouldn't be a burden on my parents. They asked for money specifically for groceries. I would have been more than happy to give them ten or 20 bucks, but I wasn't going to give them \$100 for groceries when I'd been living off of the Campbell's soup that I bought for the past three weeks. It was met with: "If you're not going to help, get out."

I was pretty upset, so I gathered up my things and left for the night. I was going to come back to get the rest of my things in the morning, as it was late by the time this confrontation happened. When I returned the next morning, they had changed the locks. I wasn't even gone for 12 hours and they had changed the locks. I got the message loud and clear.

I knocked on the door and they asked for my keys back. They knew I didn't have anywhere else to stay. I ended up staying in my car that night and it stayed like that for almost a full year. It was a rough situation. Working and going to school without a place to live? I don't suggest it.

We ended up staying in the car because we were still looking for a job for Kael. You can't live on one income anymore: it's just not doable. We parked the car at Walmart at night. We got a post office box so that it looked like we had an address: no one will hire you if you leave the address line blank on an application. If we couldn't even afford to eat, we certainly didn't have any money to go to school. I dropped out of NHTI when we were living in the car. I was barely surviving. You just can't learn in an environment like that.

Kael: Despite attending a job fair in Concord, New Hampshire, I couldn't find a job. We did the best that we could to hide the fact that we were homeless because we didn't want people to start asking questions and making us feel worse than we already did. We got a post office box to send our mail to, and we showered in a locker room at NHTI when we could in the mornings. This was extremely uncomfortable for both of us, as Cadyn had also come out as transgender by that point. We both presented as male,

but we weren't comfortable using the men's bathroom or locker room because there weren't stalls or curtains. We would sneak into the women's locker room shortly after they opened the building in the early morning, and shower as quickly as possible because it was the safest time to do so. It was a stressful arrangement, to say the least, though I am grateful that I had access to those resources.

Another challenge was getting dressed every day. Trying to get dressed in a car with another person is difficult, let alone trying to get a tight chest binder on with limited room. Everything that we owned was in that car, so it was very crowded. We were living in the Walmart parking lot the winter that we started binding, and we couldn't use the store's bathrooms to change. How do you explain walking into a bathroom with a bound chest, and walking out of a bathroom with double 'D's'? Is it more awkward to make that transition in a men's bathroom or a women's bathroom? We didn't want to find out. This was also the reason that we never tried to go to the shelter: would we sleep on the men's side or the women's side?

Cadyn: Kael finally got a job over the holiday season and I was working at Best Buy. With both of us working, we made enough money that we were able to stay with a friend and her five-year-old son and we could help with some of their bills. We babysat her son a lot because she was just getting out of a bad relationship and she needed extra help. Even with both of us employed, minimum wage jobs didn't provide enough income that we could get a place of our own.

Kael: I worked two part-time seasonal jobs during that winter which was an additional stressor. Cadyn also had a job, but we were still unable to scrape enough together to get an apartment and pay bills. We couldn't afford to pay for our cell phones so we lost that ability to communicate as well. This made it even more difficult to get a job. No one wants to give you a job if you can't provide them an address or phone number, because they are afraid that you are going to leave, or that you are unstable. It's a strange place to be: people wouldn't give us jobs because we didn't have a home address, but in order to get our own apartment, we needed jobs. It was a vicious cycle.

It's Not Our Home

Homelessness has become so common in large cities, that people are almost immune to it. It is rare that the average person walking down the street, stops to have a conversation with the people asking for change.

Robin: Twelve years ago I was hooked on crack, living on the streets. I was dying. I had been out there more than 25 years. It's who I was, who I am, it's in my blood. Being queer and homeless is really rough, and unfortunately there are more and more queer kids out on the street. I travelled all around the country, taking odd jobs and hitchhiking from one place to another. One day in Philadelphia a guy came and found me in the shelter, reached his hand out to me and said, "Come have coffee with me."

He saved me. He invited me to a meeting at an LGBTQ center in Philly and told me that I just needed to hear these people talk. I didn't want any part of it. She dragged me by the ear kicking and screaming to this meeting of folks dealing with queer economic justice. It turned out to be a panel of folks talking about homelessness, drug addiction, unemployment, and discrimination. They ended up passing the microphone around the room and when it reached me I stood up and I told them everything that they needed to do. I told them they needed to go into the shelter system and find the homeless queers, because there were so many of us. I had so much to say and no one had ever given me the opportunity to share it and actually be listened to.

A few months later they asked me if I wanted to be the director of the community center. I thought to myself, "Are they idiots? I just left my box and stopped smoking crack and you want to pay me thousands of dollars to manage your shelter? I have no education."

However, I looked at them and said, "Of course I will."

I went into the job with the idea that I would do what I thought was best for my community. The first rule I had was do no harm. It was that simple.

Rebecca: I continued sleeping in the park for the next month or so, going to the soup kitchen for dinner and eating lunch at school during the week. I was still enjoying the novelty of being able to wear makeup, jewelry and pants without being chastised. After school I would stop by the soup kitchen, and then go to a coffee shop and do my homework until they closed at 9pm, before heading back to the park. Just when I had gotten into a routine, the weather changed. I woke up one morning covered in frost, and I realized that my nights in the park had come to an end.

That morning at school I confided in my friend Felicia that my mom had kicked me out. Felicia was horrified when I told her I had been living in the park. I begged her not to tell her parents: I didn't want them to call the cops, or to get CPS involved. After school I went to Felicia's house, and her mom, Amanda, asked me how I was doing. I broke down crying and told her about my mom disowning me, about living in the park, about eating at the soup kitchen. Amanda was so kind. She just hugged me and told me it was going to be okay. I asked if I could stay with them.

"Honey, if I had the space I would let you stay here, but I have four kids of my own." She said.

"Can I at least borrow a sleeping bag?" I sobbed.

I was really surprised when she replied. "Of course not!"

Amanda then said that I wouldn't be spending another night outside, so I wouldn't need a sleeping bag. She called her sister, Mandy, who had another kid my age and an extra bedroom. Before I knew it, we were driving across town so I could stay with Mandy and her son Alex. I had met them a few times, and I knew Mandy was a friend of my mom. I was a little bit nervous because I didn't know whether or not Mandy would kick me out, too, if my mom talked to her and told her that I was bisexual. I asked Amanda if it would be a problem, and she couldn't stop laughing. When we got to the next stoplight, she looked at me and said, "You know Alex is transgender, right? I don't think it will be a problem."

Mandy was more than willing to help me, but she was a little hesitant that she would get in trouble for harboring a runaway. Even though I hadn't left of my own choosing, I would still be viewed as a juvenile delinquent by the police. Mandy went to my mom's house and got her to sign a note that said that Mandy could make medical decisions for me, could sign permission slips for me, and couldn't be sued for harboring me. My mom was relieved to give up all of her parental responsibilities. Part of me was excited that I was going to be able to stay with Mandy without a hassle, and part of me was so hurt that my mom was so willing to give me up.

Matt: Each week, I had a supervised visit with my mom at the Children and Family Services office. My mom had agreed to go through rehab and to take some parenting classes. During a supervised visit, my mom, the caseworker, my Spanish teacher and I were sitting around a table in the Children and Family Services office. They were talking about my mom's progress with rehab, and we were working on plans for me to return to her home. The meeting was fairly non-eventful. My mom asked how school was going, and I started to tell her that my boyfriend and I were taking several classes together.

As soon as I mentioned having a boyfriend, my mom lunged across the table at me, screaming that she wouldn't have a faggot for a son. The caseworker was shocked. Until that moment, she didn't understand why I was so afraid to be with my mom. My mom was restrained, and the caseworker began the process to terminate my mother's parental rights. After several months of paperwork, my teacher and her husband adopted me.

I'm really grateful that they were willing to take me in, but their house never felt like home. Because of them I never had to experience homelessness in the traditional sense: I always had a roof over my head. Yet, I'm not sure I've ever lived in a place that felt like home. If they hadn't been willing to take me, I'm sure I would have ended up on the streets. They were good role models, but I never really thought of them as parents. They were very young when they adopted me, and now, more than 10 years later, they've begun to have their own kids. I don't feel like I'm a part

of their new family.

Samantha: A lot of the girls who end up in the shelter have to become sex workers. You have to eat, you have to survive. I was 17, stupid as shit, and didn't even finish high school. I couldn't get a real job, so I did what I needed to. I'd like to say that I stopped once I made enough money to rent my own place, but once you start you never really stop. It's a lifestyle. It's what you know and no one on the outside really ever gets it.

San Francisco is known for its lax attitude about drugs, people smoke pot on the street and the cops don't care. As soon as you're homeless, though, drug use is a major offense. I got kicked out of the LGBT shelter for using drugs. I couldn't believe it. These people were supposed to be family. How could they abandon me, too?

Sometimes I really want to stop selling myself, but then hungry. [Laughs] The work is so hit and miss. Sometimes I have an apartment with a few other girls, but then we'll have a falling out and I'll be back on the streets. Other times I'll shack with a girlfriend, but I can only date other street girls. They are the only ones who understand the rules: you sleep with guys for work and girls for fun and never the other way around.

Poverty is cyclical, and often multi-generational. When finances are tight, any unexpected medical bill, housing change, or car repair can put an individual back on the streets.

Kael: I had been homeless for about a year when I ran into my mother. She had kicked her husband out of the house because he was emotionally and physically abusing her and my sisters. She asked me to move back home to help with the kids. My mother was depressed and needed me to take care of my siblings and clean up the mess that her husband had left.

Cadyn: We eventually moved to the Upper Valley after Kael ran into his mom. Her husband had just left her. She was depressed and said she needed to go to the hospital. She is a person who creates very high-drama situations and she definitely needed help with the kids while she worked things out. Her kids were 12 and 16 at the time. She said we didn't have

to pay any rent as long as we helped with the kids and did some of the grocery shopping.

Kael's mom was going through therapy, and for a while she was doing very well. She was proud of herself for staying away from Eric, who was very abusive mentally and emotionally, and occasionally physically. One day out of the blue she said, "Guess who I brought home?"

Kael: Cadyn and I lived there for about a month without incident, but it came to a swift and ugly end when my mother let her husband move back in.

The day he moved in was my 21st birthday, and we were supposed to have a party. I was really excited because everything seemed to be coming together in terms of having some sense of stability. When my mom mentioned that my stepfather was going to move back in, I told her, "If he comes back, he won't let us Cadyn or I stay here."

My stepfather not only struggled with alcohol and drug use, but he was also extremely homophobic and transphobic. It was a dangerous situation for Cadyn and I because we were gay and transgender. We knew that it was not going to go over well with all of us under the same roof. He persuaded my mother to let him return home with promises that he accepted Cadyn and me. Of course, as soon as he moved in, he kicked us out.

My mother repeatedly did this: she would choose him over her children, over me especially.

Cadyn: Not even a month after Kael's stepfather came back, we were told we had to get out. We had been there about two months. We were told we had to leave within the week, and the only place we could get by the end of the week was a room in Kael's uncle's trailer. It worked out, and we're still there, but I feel a little stuck. It's hard to have two people living in one tiny room. We don't have a lot of freedom because it's not our home. I don't even feel like I can clean, and it drives me crazy.

The Outside World is Still Dangerous For Us, Being Queer

While most of the individuals I interviewed have overcome their housing issues, not everyone has been so lucky.

Samantha: I'm on the streets again right now, but I got some plans. I'm dating a new girl and she seems pretty sweet. We're going to rent an apartment with a few of the working girls and maybe things will get better. She really wants to get out of the trade. Maybe if she does, she'll help me, too.

Matt: After I graduated from high school, I moved to Nashua to go to college. I haven't been back for more than a visit because I don't feel comfortable with the situation. Now that my foster parents have a couple of their own kids, I feel like the fifth wheel. I'm thankful that they helped me, and even though I love them both, I've never been able to tell them. Even though they got me through high school, and have been supportive of my sexuality, I've never felt quite supported enough to let my guard down around them. They may have given me a place to stay when I needed it, but it's never been a home.

I completed a certificate in culinary studies last year, and I've taken some time away from school to work. I like to cook, but being on my feet all day every day has gotten old. I'm applying to a few schools in January, and I'm hoping to go back next year for a degree in special education. It's really important to me to work with youth, especially with kids who may have behavioral issues. A lot of those behavior problems start with a bad situation at home, and if I am working with them every day, I may be able to give them the help they need to transcend an abusive situation.

Rebecca : I stayed with Mandy and Alex for the next two years. Alex was really helpful in connecting me with local LGBT resources. I was able to explore my own identity in a safe environment and, much to my mother's chagrin, I am proud to say that I'm bisexual. Even after Alex graduated and went off to college, Mandy let me stay. Since I had stable food and housing, I was able to finish high school and I began working on an associate's

degree. I started working part time while I was going to school, and once I graduated with my AA, I had enough money saved up to move out of Mandy's house and get an apartment of my own.

I've been managing a restaurant for the past few years, and I'm going back to school this fall to start a bachelor's degree in hospitality and business management. I'm really happy to be where I am, and I am proud that I was able to make it as far as I have. Sometimes I wish I could show my mom just how far I've come, but she is still shunning me, of course.

Cadyn: I'd rather be in Concord where there are more options, more entertainment, more anything. In Concord you can drive a half-hour and find anything you want. Here in the Upper Valley, you drive for half an hour and you are 30 minutes into the middle of nowhere. Unfortunately, we really can't afford to leave and I don't have room to complain: we have a roof over our heads.

Robin: It just takes one person reaching their hand out. I am speaking for all of the folks that didn't get that hand, that didn't make it this far. You don't have to give people your change, you just have to talk to 'em and say, "Hey, stay safe tonight."

The outside world is still dangerous for us, being queer. That hasn't changed at all since I was a young kid. I still get harassed out on the street, there is a lot of bullying and gay bashing once we step out into the world. We don't seek violence, but it sure comes and finds us.

I always keep my hand out and hope that the person I am reaching out to takes the step to grab on. They have to be willing to take that step: you can't force it on them. Homeless people become invisible even though we are often right in front of you. I say "we" because I am not that far removed from being homeless.

I go around and tell stories. I tell histories. It is my history, but it is also every other butch's history, every other queer person who had to go through difficulties of being gay, butch, or trans.

Conclusion

The above stories show a wide array of experiences. From drug use, to sex work, to academic success, it is clear that homelessness is hardly monolithic. Some of the interviewees struggle to find and keep housing; others struggle to create a sense of home within their housing. It is apparent that even for those who have succeeded in overcoming their homelessness, the experience will forever leave a drastic impact on their lives.

LGBTQ youth, a population incredibly at risk for familial rejection and homelessness, face extreme barriers to staying safe and to accessing shelter. Robin's story speaks to the historical context of LGBTQ individuals resorting to drugs, sex work and theft in order to survive, but Samantha's involvement as a sex-worker shows that options for homeless queer youth haven't necessarily improved as much as one would like to hope. The stories of Cadyn and Kael hint at an inability for transgender youth to access gendered spaces such as bathrooms, shelters and locker rooms: spaces where a firm gender binary creates hostility for those whose bodies are not strictly male or female. Rebecca and Matt show that homelessness does not necessarily mean being without shelter: it means being without a place where one can feel at home.

There are many challenges in interviewing homeless individuals. The above stories are from people who have, for the most part, been able to transcend their homelessness and who have survived the experience. There are many who are not so lucky, and it is important for LGBTQ communities to recognize and mourn these losses. Those who have died on the streets are the voices that have been permanently silenced, and whose histories can never be retrieved. It is not enough to read the above stories and empathize with these characters: we must take their tales as a call to action to ensure that the systemic violence of familial rejection, poverty and homelessness does not continue to pervade our communities.