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Spotlight On:
The Human Rights Campaign

By Rashal G. Baz

The discrimination of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (“LGBTQ”) children in foster care is a reoccurring nightmare over many years. Fortunately, national attention of this worrisome discrimination has grown and further catalyzed organizations to advocate on behalf of LGBTQ foster care children. As an example, the Human Rights Campaign (“HRC”), founded by Steve Endean in 1980, is the largest civil rights organization that works for equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals, including foster care children.

Creation, Vision, and Mission

Understanding the power of change through legal means, the HRC Fund began as one of the first gay and lesbian political action committees in the United States. The HRC Fund initially focused on financially backing political candidates who supported gay civil rights legislation. According to the HRC website, “the [HRC] Fund quickly rose to prominence – after its first election cycle in 1982, the Fund was the 17th largest independent political action committee in the United States.” Dropping ‘Fund’ from its name in 1995, the HRC expanded its reach far beyond political lobbying work and launched focused informative projects. The first of these developments included the “Workplace Project” and the “Family Project,” both centered on public education of LGBTQ matters. The expansion of HRC’s educational arm paved the transformation of HRC’s research, communications, marketing, and public relations functions.

Covering problems with awareness and social policy affecting LGBTQ people, the HRC represents a force of more than 1.5 million members and supporters nationwide. Even as the HRC has shifted roles throughout the past three decades, they still maintain a concentrated focus of advocacy. HRC’s current vision statement reads: “HRC envisions a world where lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people are embraced as full members of society at home, at work and in every community.” Further, HRC’s current mission statement is built upon the promotion of the social welfare of the LGBTQ community by inspiring people to end discrimination, promote public education, and achieve fundamental fairness and equality for all. Facing many challenges and achieving significant victories along the way, the HRC is using their wide network to cast a spotlight onto LGBTQ problems affecting youth – particularly in foster care.

A Focus on the Youth

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, there are approximately 175,000 youth ages ten through eighteen in foster care in the United States. Of these youth, an estimated five to ten percent are LGBTQ, many having been abandoned by their families due to their sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression. This struggle does not cease when they enter the child welfare system, as many agencies lack the tools and knowledge to adequately provide these youth with the necessary targeted services. On the forefront of addressing LGBTQ youth in foster care is HRC's "All Children – All Families" Project ("ACAF"). ACAF "promotes LGBT cultural competency among child welfare agencies through innovative resources including an online agency self-assessment tool; comprehensive staff training, free technical assistance, and more." Child welfare agencies that recruit, license, support and place with adoption/foster families and/or provide direct services to youth in out-of-home care are eligible to participate.

Besides advocating on behalf of LGBTQ youth in foster care, ACAF also advocates on behalf of the nearly two million LGBTQ adults that are interested in adoption, but whom may meet discrimination and non-supportive environments. ACAF allows those adults who are looking to become foster/adoptive parents to search agencies who are participants and leaders within ACAF. Lori Ross, ACAF's executive director explains:

"The LGBT community has been overlooked by foster care and adoption agencies for too long. Being able to experience the joy of raising children is a gift that anyone should have the opportunity to pursue, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. But for LGBT families, that process could be difficult and riddled with pitfalls along the way. We are delighted that our agency can now provide the support and openness that LGBT prospective parents are looking for when they begin their journey towards foster care and adoption."

Thomas Davis, HRC Foundation's Youth Ambassador, spends his time advising foster or adoptive parents on how to best support LGBTQ youth. Davis stresses the importance of recognizing the children's other issues beyond the fact they are LGBTQ. "If you help them meet other needs they will be able to cope with being LGBTQ easier," he explained.

Adopting a hands-on approach, the HRC hosts *Time To Thrive*, an annual national conference to promote safety, inclusion and well-being for LGBTQ youth. The conference is targeted at youth-serving professionals, including but not limited to, K-12 educators, mental health providers, pediatricians, religious leaders, recreational athletic coaches, and youth development staff. The goal of the conference is to educate, from the top-down, about the impact suffered by LGBTQ youth due to family rejection, bullying, and daily concerns for safety. HRC also uses the conference to publicize their research on the 'stark picture of difficulties' LGBTQ youth face and to call to action concerned adults. The

conference provides an opportunity for professionals who work with youth to build the awareness and cultural competency, learn current and emerging best practices, and pass on research from leading experts and national organizations in the field.

Growing Up LGBT in America

Growing Up LGBT in America is a report by the HRC that surveys more than 10,000 LGBT-identified youth ages thirteen through seventeen. The report is the largest known sample of LGBT youth from every region of the country, centered on uncovering the difficulties LGBT youth face and the impact on their well-being. These difficulties stem from official government discrimination or indifference along with social ostracism.

The survey measured key factors that impact the daily lives of LGBT youth, including:

- A sense of being accepted by family, peers, and the larger community – in sports leagues, clubs, places of worship, school, work, online, and more;
- Access to LGBT affirmative support and services;
- Negative experiences such as verbal harassment, cyber-bullying, exclusion from activities;
- Connection to a welcoming religious or spiritual community; and
- Level of optimism about the future and the ability to live a happy life as an “out” LGBT person.

The results showed that one of the biggest problems LGBT youth face are their parents/family not accepting them. Compared with their non-LGBT peers, LGBT youth surveyed reported much lower levels of happiness, a higher incidence of alcohol and drug use, and less connection to adult support during personal problems.

HRC believes LGBT youth will lead lives that are safer, healthier, and more fulfilling when institutional discrimination ends and the country fully embraces young people regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity. HRC fights to bring these problem areas to the media, in turn, sparking legal action and policy changes. Visit their website, <http://www.hrc.org/>, for more information and to holistically learn about their organization.

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