

5.3 YMCA SPROTT HOUSE: CREATING A BETTER SPACE FOR LGBTQ2S YOUTH IN TORONTO

Sprott House: Our First Year

Kate Miller

YMCA Sprott House – Walmer Road Centre, Toronto’s first and Canada’s largest housing program for LGBTQ2S youth aged 16 to 24, officially opened its doors on February 1, 2016. Twenty-five LGBTQ2S youth live at Sprott House, supported by a team of Case Managers and Youth Workers, and regularly scheduled skills-building and recreational programming.

The house itself is a three-storey red brick building on the outer rim of downtown Toronto, in the Annex neighbourhood, defined mostly by the University of Toronto’s St. George Campus. There are 25 individual units with their own washrooms, two shared kitchens, two shared lounges and two staff offices. The long hallways and staircases are lined with posters for community events and programs, and underneath a crystal chandelier in the high-ceilinged front entranceway is a table with pamphlets and a bowl of condoms. Adorning a wall near the staircase, a colourful mural painted by genderqueer artist Coco Guzman depicts a house being handed from trans and queer activists of the past to the youth of the present.

While people had been advocating for LGBTQ2S-specific housing for youth in Toronto for decades, the YMCA Sprott House story took shape when the 2013 Street Needs Assessment found that at least 21% of youth living in City of Toronto shelters identified as LGBTQ2S. For safety reasons relating to disclosing their sexuality or gender identity to survey volunteers, it is likely the percentage is much higher—closer to the 42% cited in a report by The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. This, combined with several research reports about trans men and LGBTQ2S youth experiencing violence in the city’s shelter system, prompted the City of Toronto to make existing shelters safer, and to add 54 new beds designated for LGBTQ2S youth to the shelter system.

When the City put out a request for proposals for shelter and transitional programs specifically for LGBTQ2S youth, we (the YMCA of Greater Toronto) realized we had the opportunity to meet an urgent community need. The YMCA has provided housing for youth experiencing homelessness in Toronto since 1984, with a long history of and commitment to starting and sustaining relevant programs for youth experiencing homelessness. The YMCA was very excited to provide this program in partnership with many invested systems and communities. YMCA staff were aware of the high numbers of LGBTQ2S youth in their programs, the unique challenges those youth faced in securing long-term or permanent housing and the degree of violence in the shelter system. Adding Sprott House as an LGBTQ2S program underscores the YMCA's continued commitment to diversity and inclusion.

Due to overcrowding in the emergency shelter system, Toronto's high youth-unemployment rate, unaffordable rents and decades-long waiting lists for social housing, we knew the demand made this kind of program essential. Youth and staff at other agencies had been calling the program daily since the announcement was made that the YMCA would be opening a program for LGBTQ2S youth. We prioritized acceptance of program applications based on the level of safety/risk youth described in their applications. We knew there were young people living in housing programs, shelters, and with friends, family or in rooming houses who were facing immediate threats to their physical and emotional safety due to their sexual and gender identity. We also knew that for LGBTQ2S racialized youth, disabled youth, and young people who use substances these risks would be higher, and the barriers to securing safer housing would be increased.

While interviewing youth for Sprott House to evaluate their readiness to live independently and their need for housing, it became clear the level of trauma experienced by LGBTQ2S youth applying to our program was very high. It appeared that young people applying needed more support than the program had originally been designed to provide. This strengthened our belief that a transitional housing program would not be a one-size-fits-all solution for LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness. Many youth identified that their need to live in a place where their gender identity and sexuality was affirmed took priority over all other needs. Our program was their first choice over programs that included intensive mental health support, food and supports for daily living, housing first for substance users, detox programs, or programs for young people with developmental disabilities, simply because those programs were not designed with the unique needs of LGBTQ2S youth in mind.

At this point, YMCA Sprott House – Walmer Road operates as a one-year transitional program for youth. This was a difficult programming decision for us to make, given that research shows there are more positive outcomes when youth stay in a transitional housing program for two or more years. However, the legal definitions in Ontario for program participation versus tenancy pose restrictions on length of stay. We constantly navigate this complexity, supporting youth to find supportive housing within a year, while trying to support their personal growth. We understand that a one-year program poses difficulties for youth who may not be ready to leave. We revisit this policy regularly, and continue to try to find ways to support youth who need a longer stay, while ensuring that the program remains available to as many youth as possible.

While we believe choice is the best solution, and all housing and support programs for young people should be safe, appropriate and accessible for LGBTQ2S youth, we made changes to our program in the short term in order to provide more support. We added staff to support youth, make referrals, run programming and manage potential crises. We created partnerships with other agencies, including community medical health centres, violence against women programs, programs for Indigenous youth, an organization that provides a mental health outreach worker onsite once per week, and two substance use support programs, including the YMCA's Youth Substance Abuse Program¹ (YSAP). Our program was designed with youth independence in mind, and therefore some youth may feel there is less staff available for one-on-one conversations than they have experienced in other programs. Our hope is that within the year, youth become less reliant on staff and are connected to supports and build relationships that will last after their time in our program.

In addition to outside supports and structure, our program is always evolving to better serve the young people who live here. While many transitional housing programs require young people to be engaged in school or employment, we realized both school and work can be systemically inaccessible to LGBTQ2S youth—especially trans youth and racialized youth. We allow youth to move in with a range of self-defined goals, from “Wanting to stay safe and improve my mental health,” to “Having a safe place to medically transition,” to “Continuing to work and re-enroll in college.” Given the needs of the young people using our services, the first year has been geared more toward emotional safety and creating community and relationships than toward life-skill development (a term that usually refers to cooking,

¹ Learn more about YSAP: <https://ymcagta.org/youth-programs/youth-substance-abuse-program>

cleaning, attending appointments, completing school, working, etc.). Our belief is that by healing from trauma, experiencing safety and creating relationships, young people will have a firm foundation upon which to build their lives in a way that is true to what they want.

We have developed a program in which we regularly seek and receive a wide range of feedback from the youth, and our small staff team constantly strives to meet their needs with fairness and respect. For example, many youth complained their food was being stolen from the communal kitchen. We offered to lock the fridges, but some youth requested that we install security cameras in common spaces. We listened to their concerns in group and one-on-one meetings. Balancing fairness and respect, we felt installing cameras would significantly violate privacy and possibly damage relationships, and we therefore communicated our decision to install locks. When some young people objected to this solution, we continued to listen and talk with them, but ultimately stood by our decision. We try to be as transparent as possible and recognize that our decisions won't satisfy everyone. We strive to make decisions by taking into consideration the youth voice, safety, respect, funder policy and other priorities.

Another area of regular negotiation is around discharging youth from the program. Our goal is to never discharge youth; the pressure we feel as a staff team is exacerbated by our knowledge that they may face homophobic, transphobic or biphobic violence in the shelter system. We are aware of the destabilizing trauma of being discharged, and are committed to serving young people we feel will be able to stay in our program. We work very hard to clearly communicate norms, policies and expectations within the program, supporting youth to work with us to maintain an environment that is safe and respectful for all residents. For example, it is an expectation that all youth attend house meetings; we feel it is an opportunity to communicate any important information to youth, and also to address issues youth have brought to our attention.

Our staff members consist of individuals with formal education and work experience in residential programs, those with extensive community-based experience and staff who have lived experience in housing systems. This combination of backgrounds is ideal—staff members who have experience in residential programs bring ideas for structures they have seen work, knowledge of referrals and ways to make the system work for the youth we serve. This includes a deep understanding of legislation and policies that frame our program. Staff members coming from community-based programs are able to come up with creative and empowering solutions to youth concerns, and to expanding the limits of a transitional housing program.

Prior to submitting our proposal to the City of Toronto, the YMCA of Greater Toronto made a commitment to reviewing and improving the ways we serve LGBTQ2S youth. YMCA Sprott House has been very well supported, celebrated and learned from across the whole association. Programs that serve LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness regularly reflect on policies and practices and how they impact LGBTQ2S youth, and have added cultural competency to job postings. Our human resources department has sought input and updated policies and procedures to better respect trans staff members. We have had camping, health and fitness, and newcomer youth programs reach out to us for ways they can best include and affirm LGBTQ2S people. Our CEO, Medhat Mahdy, is deeply committed to the YMCA of Greater Toronto's Diversity and Social Inclusion value: he has added his pronouns to his email signature and participates in the YMCA's annual Pride initiatives. YMCA Sprott House affirms the YMCA's commitment to diversity and social inclusion, and has also provided learning opportunities for many YMCA programs.

In addition to the support of the YMCA, we receive significant community support and recognition from individuals and other organizations. We regularly receive fundraising support from high school and college clubs, as well as from individuals and small LGBTQ2S-owned businesses. Glad Day Bookshop, the world's oldest LGBTQ2S bookstore, organized a book drive that resulted in a fabulous library for Sprott House, and a community group organized a walk that raised more than \$25,000 for the program. Additionally, projects such as the City of Toronto's employment support programs, as well as other housing and shelter programs, have reached out and asked how they can better serve LGBTQ2S youth, and have listened to our feedback and made changes.

As we evolve and grow into our second year, we have identified goals moving forward. We would like to work toward more culturally relevant services for Indigenous youth who make up 20% of those we serve. In our next year, we will engage youth in an empowerment and leadership model to formalize the excellent leadership and mentorship we see among youth within the house. We hope to continue to create change for LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness in Toronto, and work with our partners to create change in the many systems that intersect with our transitional housing program.

Staff Member Reflection

Kavita Bissoondial

When I tell people I work at YMCA Sprott House, it is always met with excitement and curiosity about Toronto's first housing program developed specifically for LGBTQ2S-spectrum youth. The past year has been amazing to witness, and has also brought some of the most challenging experiences I've faced as a worker. In this reflection, I want to share some of the practices I have appreciated, the lessons we are learning as a frontline staff team and some of the areas we aim to continue growing in.

It has been the foundation of the program to approach youth work in a way that recognizes the diverse ways trauma impacts LGBTQ2S youth. We know young people respond and react to the various forms of violence they have experienced and that, often, being in the shelter system creates further violence. We aim to meet young people where they are at, and let them determine their own goals. When youth enter Sprott House, youth workers and case managers work with them to figure out what it is they want to accomplish while they are with us. Their goals can be related to many things: physical health, mental or emotional health, school, employment, journeys with gender or sexuality, developing skills or talents, and more. These nonjudgemental, supportive conversations lay the groundwork for developing relationships of trust and affirmation to help youth work toward their goals.

In terms of physical space, youth have expressed that it has been deeply transformative to have their own room as a stable space where they do not have to worry about keeping up an appearance to others, where they can retreat and also still be able to access staff for support in focusing on their goals. We have also been lucky in our partnerships with excellent mental health workers who, like the full-time staff at Sprott, are queer and trans and can meet with youth at the house or in the community.

Through supportive conversations, workshops, and knowledge and skills sharing, staff have made space for centring diverse gender expressions and orientations. Much of this work has been to affirm individuals in their own explorations, but also challenging youth living in the house about their own beliefs about sexuality and gender. There is often an assumption that LGBTQ2S-spectrum people understand all the issues that individuals in the community face, and that we do not oppress each other. This is simply not true. We see this in the ways residents gender and mis-gender each other, and in moments when residents are struggling to process emotions and use language that could be hurtful to

others. When residents move in, we encourage them to share their own gender pronouns and ask for the pronouns of other residents they meet. Through these conversations, we can assess residents' knowledge of issues affecting trans- and gender-expansive people. These are learning opportunities when we explore why someone's gender presentation is not an indicator of their identity or pronoun, and we can explain the importance of respecting people's gender pronouns and identities.

One of the core values of living at Sprott is an openness to learning about oppression and how our communities affect each other, and challenging that oppression. We explore this value in house meetings, in building contracts with youth, in our case management approach, and through workshops on topics such as self-accountability, anti-oppression, tenant rights and resident rights in the shelter system. We regularly make supportive interventions in everyday conversations about race, gender and healthy relationships, in order to establish learning moments with residents and to work toward a community where youth can live without fear of discrimination. When figuring out how to make an intervention, we take into consideration where that person is emotionally in the moment, and if they are in a place to be challenged or receive new knowledge, and explore situations or examples that are directly relevant to themselves (i.e., similarities and differences of struggles or experiences). Often, other youth are already engaged in this type of work, and both model and normalize the practice of being open to feedback, asking questions and trying your best.

Currently, more than 90% of youth living at Sprott identify as Black, Indigenous, and/or people of colour. Youth have expressed major support for our approach, as they have shared countless experiences of discrimination in housing programs. Black youth, racialized youth and Indigenous youth have been quite vocal about the challenges of having to survive in a housing system that views whiteness as the norm. Black and Indigenous youth speak regularly about the ways that racism has caused staff in other housing programs to perceive them as aggressive, scary, stupid or not valuable, resulting in their not seeking support, while being deemed simultaneously "independent" and "underachieving." Youth are combating racist stereotypes and ideas on a daily basis, and it is important for them to be able to take refuge in their home. They must be able to trust that they will be supported by a staff team that, at the very least, is actively anti-racist, but that ideally can also support them as racialized people themselves, in developing strategies for survival, healing and success on their own terms.

We intentionally make space for conversations about racism in house meetings, informal conversation and workshops, consistently affirming youth in their ability to speak freely in their own language without judgement or interruption. Staff also consistently make efforts to connect youth with programming and services that are led by Black and Indigenous people and people of colour who are also queer and trans or two-spirit. Representation and leadership by racialized communities is a vital part of how we connect with our residents. Staff aim to demonstrate anti-racist practice, not only in our interactions with youth, but also in our approaches to conflict and programming offered.

That being said, we are always trying to do better. Youth have consistently expressed the importance of having a staff team that represents their identities and lived experiences, including wanting more Black and Indigenous people on staff. Recognizing the specific needs of Indigenous youth, we hosted a barbecue with two Indigenous youth programs to build relationships with and introduce youth to different services, and the event was widely attended by participants of all programs. The majority of Indigenous residents were connected to Indigenous health and support services in the city prior to coming to YMCA Sprott House, and though some will access in-house support as needed, most have expressed feeling more interest and trust in Indigenous-centred and -operated services. Staff will continue connecting with local Indigenous organizations, bringing in relevant programming, and working to expand our knowledge as a team.

I am happy to share that most youth access staff on a regular basis, for support with jobs, housing, school, counselling, relationships and daily living. Most commonly, youth seek counselling and debriefing to talk about stresses in their lives, relationships, family dynamics and the world outside Sprott House. Staff have spent time talking with youth about gender and sexuality, but also about the Black Lives Matter movement, local politics and policies that impact low-income people, and many other issues youth express being impacted by. Often, we support youth navigating experiences of homophobia or gender discrimination that happen outside the house. Debriefing with them when they come home is vital in loosening the grip of the many forms of violence they encounter daily, including bullying, exclusion and harassment. Staff also support youth with the tough transition they face at the end of their year. Youth are faced with the difficulty of finding affordable housing in a city where rent continues to skyrocket, in a society where they face multiple forms of oppression. Staff struggle to support youth in finding appropriate living arrangements once their stay at Sprott House is over.

Overall, when things at Sprott House are great, they're fantastic. However, when things are hard, we all feel those lows. As young people navigating poverty, homophobia, transphobia, racism, mental illness and struggles with substance use, residents' crises have occurred regularly since the opening of Sprott House. Supporting youth through a crisis individually and dealing with the ways crisis can impact the larger group have been some of the greatest challenges to tackle as staff. Residents have reported experiences of abuse, assault, police violence, incarceration, forced institutionalization, overdoses and thoughts of suicide over this past year.

Improving our capacity to support individuals struggling with their substance use is a current area of growth for our program. Recognizing that substance use is neither good nor bad, we as a staff team invite open communication about substance use and work to challenge stigma towards substance users. We explore issues facing drug users alongside the issues of racism and poverty with residents. We also work to connect residents with YSAP substance use counsellors if they have any goals around their usage, be it to use less to save money, to learn how to test substances to ensure they are what they say they are or to work towards sobriety. In some emergency shelters, young people would be discharged for breaking rules around alcohol and substance use.

Additionally, youth expect to be punished for things like yelling, not doing their dishes and not returning at night. Our approach to most issues has been to have a conversation with the young person to determine why the issue is happening, make an agreement or contract with them in which they determine what the next steps are for them to change this issue or rebuild trust, and include what they and staff will do if this happens again. This has largely resulted in youth feeling able to approach us, feeling secure in knowing that they can make mistakes, and that their housing will not be jeopardized.

Over the past year, circumstances have arisen that necessitated medical and/or police services to attend Sprott House. The police have demonstrated a lack of understanding or empathy for residents, and a limited recognition of diverse genders and sexuality. Often, the ways LGBTQ2S youth have been impacted by trauma is re-engaged by interacting with paramedics, hospital workers and police. In these cases, we work with the young person to determine what they feel is an appropriate course of action. This might involve filing a complaint, advocating on the youth's behalf, intentionally checking in more regularly with staff, venting about their issue or connecting them to more peer-based services to receive further support.

The past year has been my first working in the housing system, and I feel like I still have so much to learn and accomplish in this role. I am reminded constantly that a one-year program is not long enough for young people who are on the margins to develop stability and security within themselves and their community to achieve independence.

While I am frustrated by these systems, I am also grateful for our team and the ways we have created a space where youth have expressed that they are finally able to be and explore themselves. I learn constantly about the barriers facing young people, and the ways they are creatively building strategies for navigating and overcoming them. As a worker, I have learned that my role is to build pathways with young people for them to exercise their independence and autonomy. As a frontline worker, I maintain consistency in the structure of our program, so that when things go awry, youth know there is somewhere and someone they can trust to support them. Most importantly, I work to create a space free from discrimination to provide respite from the everyday violence they face as the brilliant and brave queer and trans youth they are.

Youth Reflection

Morgan

I am a 21-year-old, masculine of centre, non-binary, trans person of colour who is Jamaican and happens to live at Sprott House, Toronto's transitional housing program specifically for LGBTQ2S youth. I chose to participate in this program reflection so that youth workers and other folks understand more about the good and bad things about transitional housing. My hope is that this will lead to changes or improvements in the services available to youth and those who provide them.

Recently, I learned that of youth who are homeless or at-risk of homelessness, up to 42% are LGBTQ2S. LGBTQ2S folks face a lot of difficulty in other shelters, this being my own experience, so it is important to have a specific service for youth who are queer and/or trans. There is homophobic and transphobic violence in shelters, even from staff members. Sprott House exists out of a real need to protect the many queer and trans youth who are at-risk of homelessness or who are homeless already.

Before I moved to Sprott House, I was living in a different transitional housing program. At the time, I identified as a lesbian, and I thought that Sprott House could be a positive space for me. I wanted to move to a place where I could get in touch with the LGBTQ2S community. For the most part, that has happened for me. Sprott House has helped me realize that I'm not alone.

I've been able to do some soul-searching through feeling comfortable enough in a positive space to reflect and grow as a person. It has helped me to become true to myself by being around those who are accepting of my identity—staff and youth. The fact that the staff at Sprott House aren't cis and straight has made such a difference for me. I've been able to see positive examples of trans men and non-binary people, and positive examples of masculinity in general. Given that I did not grow up around many good examples of masculinity, I found it difficult to imagine alternative possibilities of masculinity. Having queer and trans staff members who present this made me comfortable enough to be myself. At first I was jealous of how they embodied their identities, but then I was able to talk with staff about the complexities and nuances of my feelings around presenting in the way I always imagined, which helped me a lot.

Through the program, I've also met a lot of other queer people by going to drops-ins and other services. I feel more comfortable than I used to because the spaces I am referred to are specifically made for me (in terms of identity and experience and interests), which has helped me feel more comfortable taking up space. For example, I was in a musical, and I met Laverne Cox because of opportunities through Sprott. I also had a great experience at Toronto Pride, being in the parade with the YMCA. It was a significant memory of my time at Sprott House, just getting ready for it (we decorated t-shirts, made a banner, wore costumes), and feeling like it was a historical time because Prime Minister Trudeau was there and Black Lives Matter Toronto stopped the parade to demand support for Black-specific programming.

At Sprott, I've met some cool staff. I appreciate their dedication to helping each youth in the house. I appreciate the outreach, and I appreciate all of the support they give on a daily basis. Staff here are each so different, and they really do put in work. They have supported me in getting my goals met; many of the goals I set out to do when I got here they have helped me reach, like wanting to perform and find ways of connecting to the wider queer community. I've been able to work through some of the personal issues that have felt like ongoing barriers for me with the support of the staff at Sprott. Overall, I feel like I'm in a better space because of the support I've been given here.

One of the biggest challenges at Sprott is knowing that your one year goes by quickly, and that it is going to end soon, even from the first day. The limited time puts a lot of pressure on individuals living here. One year is not long enough for a youth coming out of homelessness to meet all their goals and be in a place to live independently. People should have supportive housing for as long as they need it. It is understandable that these policies

might exist in order to encourage people to move on, but the reality is that each individual grows at a different rate, and if they can't accomplish everything they need in that time, then it can feel like a failure. This can put a lot of pressure on anyone, let alone a youth who is trying to survive, make a career, go through a transition, or deal with any of the other challenges of being a youth living in poverty in Toronto.

In a previous program I lived in, staff could literally go with us anywhere, because there was a van to support residents. For example, if I needed to hand out resumes or had an interview, staff could accompany me, or if residents needed to move they could help; we also got to go on trips as a group. We also had tenant rights in that program that could be terminated for not following our program agreements, but we did have a certain amount of time for moving out. There was more structure, like a weekly house meeting, which worked because there were less people. In that program, there was a higher staff-to-resident ratio, which allowed for more one-on-one support with case management and counselling. It can be difficult to make appointments with Sprott staff sometimes, because there are so many people to support.

In terms of the bigger picture and what youth workers need to know about working with youth, I have a few reflections on those serving youth. First, never assume anything about a youth's identity or experiences. Staff should learn about the queer community, gender, sexuality, race and racism, and anti-oppression. This should be mandatory training. This is important because there are a lot of different kinds of people in the world, and if you have never worked with them and don't have an idea of their identity and why that's important, it could spark problems.

Second, staff should represent their youth. If the staff are majority straight and cis, or White, then it makes it less comfortable for people who don't share that identity. Being here myself, I became comfortable in myself by sharing living space with people who share my identities. We need more queer and trans folks everywhere in this field. In terms of those who are creating or structuring programs, there should be more people working on behalf of homeless youth who have lived experience. It's wrong that a lot of the people who make decisions on behalf of us, or that impact us have never been in our shoes. They expect to know what's best for us; we know what's best for us. People who have lived within the system know what needs to change. It doesn't matter if a person went to school to study this work. If they haven't seen it or lived it, it's not the same. The people who have the power to make the decisions should share some of our experiences.

Finally, it should go without saying that everyone should have housing. Things would be better if people didn't have to worry about rent. Especially in Canada, because it gets cold, it's not right that people should be out on the street or put into shelters that can feel like prisons. Everyone should have that basic need met, and it should be available to those who need it. It is important to work together as a community to change the housing system, and change its inaccessibility. We have to be courageous to do what is right, not what is profitable or easy or in the best interests of those who have the privilege and resources.

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Kate Miller is the Director of YMCA Sprott House in Toronto, Ontario and a volunteer staff member at Shameless Magazine. She is a Child and Youth worker and also holds a diploma from the incredible Assaulted Women's and Children's Counsellor Advocate program at George Brown College.

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Kavita has worked as a youth worker, facilitator, storyteller and community organizer for over eight years. Her work has primarily focused on building and sustaining communities of peer support for queer and trans people of colour and indigenous folks.

Morgan

Morgan has navigated housing systems in different cities for four years. They are a performer, facilitator, and they are hungry for justice, freedom, and affordable housing.

