

## 5.2 MESSY AND MAGICAL: A CLOSER LOOK AT THE GLBT HOST HOME PROGRAM

Raquel (Rocki) Simões & Khalid Adam

### Introduction

The GLBT Host Home Program (GLBT HHP), offered through Avenues for Homeless Youth, provides a unique housing model for queer and trans youth who are experiencing housing instability, most of whom, in our area, are youth of colour. This program, based in Minneapolis-Saint Paul (known as the Twin Cities), Minnesota, is one of the longest-running LGBTQ2S-specific host home programs in the United States. Many communities across the U.S. and Canada have sought information on this model as they attempt to address youth homelessness. This case study illustrates key characteristics of the GLBT Host Home Program, and provides feedback gathered during two listening sessions held in August 2016, with current and past youth and host participants. The information gathered during the listening sessions highlights issues the program continually explores: namely, how do we cultivate a lens of intersectionality in this work, and support youth and hosts within the context of individual, systemic, institutional and historic oppressions?

### Program History

The GLBT HHP was created at the end of 1997 after several years of community conversations and organizing around the issue of LGBTQ2S youth homelessness in the Twin Cities. An Advisory Council met monthly to discuss and research possible responses to the overrepresentation of queer and trans youth experiencing homelessness in our communities, as well as the lack of culturally competent and LGBTQ2S-specific services. A review of a host home program out of the GLBT Community Center in Denver (the only existing LGBTQ2S host home program at the time<sup>1</sup>) and a feasibility study by a local research foundation, in 1995 and 1996, respectively, informed the initial development of the GLBT HHP. A few years prior to this, YouthLink (at the time called Minneapolis Youth Diversion Program) had started offering a support group for LGBTQ2S youth, facilitated

---

<sup>1</sup> By the time the GLBT HHP's program coordinator started her job in the fall of 1997, the host home program at The Center in Denver was no longer running.

by a psychiatric nurse and out lesbian, who then wrote a grant to the State of MN which enabled the organization to hire its first GLBT Case Manager. This new position—the first of its kind here in MN—had an Advisory Council that met monthly to support the work of the Case Manager. This is the group that then later guided the research and initial program design of the GLBT HHP.

During the years it was located at YouthLink, GLBT HHP housed approximately 100 youth. Due to funding deficits, and programming and staffing changes, GLBT HHP was on hiatus from 2004 to 2007. It was re-started in January 2007 at Avenues for Homeless Youth, a nonprofit agency in the Twin Cities; it has been a program offered through Avenues ever since. Although GLBT HHP began as a program for youth aged 16 to 21, the top of the age range was expanded to 24, in response to community need. The program has also made exceptions for several 15-year-old youth.

### **Key Characteristics of Our GLBT HHP:**

- Small and community-driven;
- Not emergency housing, but instead more like a transitional living program (the average stay is approximately one year);
- Does not receive government funding;
- Does not license homes;
- The DOPA (Delegation of Parental Authority) document is used when minors participate in the program;
- Hosts are volunteers, but are able to request \$50 to \$100 per month to help with increased costs, such as groceries (introduced at the end of 2015);
- Youth in host homes receive a \$75 Visa card every month (also introduced at the end of 2015);
- Youth choose to be in the program (no one is ‘placed’ in it);
- Youth are referred by youth workers from outside or from the Avenues Program, and then work with the GLBT HHP case manager while participating in the program;
- The program is informed by a commitment to social justice and an awareness of systems of oppression.

## Identifying Hosts

Hosts are recruited primarily through community engagement and organizing, social media, and with the help of the program’s Advisory Council, which is made up of community members from other local organizations, as well as past youth participants, hosts and organizers. The size, make-up, and involvement of this group have varied greatly during its history; however, we prioritize the recruitment of queer and trans people of colour, and community organizers and leaders. There are currently only three members, and while they do not meet regularly, they keep in contact.

The program manager meets with potential hosts and interested parties throughout the year to explain how the program is structured and to answer any questions. The current application process for hosts involves completing paperwork and assignments, a background check, a series of interviews and 16 hours of training. Training<sup>2</sup> is conducted two or three times per year for those who choose to complete the application process.

The host training includes broad information about youth homelessness, and more specific information on LGBTQ2S youth homelessness, including trauma and resiliency; White privilege and anti-racism; an examination of trainees’ values, boundaries, expectations and triggers; and conversations with current and past hosts and current and past youth participants. After training, hosts are selected and matches are made between potential hosts and youth. This process is youth-guided—the youth review files of potential hosts and identify who they would like to meet. A series of meetings between the potential host and the youth are facilitated, release of liability waivers are signed, and the youth moves in. Hosts receive ongoing support and training, including monthly community support groups, monthly home visits and further training opportunities.

Our current operational capacity is 20 to 25 homes in the program, which allows up to 10 young people to live in host homes at a time. Based on our experience, at least half the host homes will be ‘on hold’ at any given time, which means the hosts have had a youth in the home who has moved out, and they are taking time off before welcoming another youth.

---

<sup>2</sup> We often have guests from other states who are starting HHPs participate in our training, and we welcome the opportunity to share our materials and history.

## Pros and Cons of Key Program Characteristics

PROS	CONS
<p><b>Small and community-driven:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Easier to maintain non-institutional ‘heart;’</li> <li>■ Easier to engage in the ‘magic’ and ‘messiness’ of authentic human relationships;</li> <li>■ Easier to recognize and challenge power and privilege;</li> <li>■ Easier to more effectively and quickly respond to changing community needs.</li> </ul> <p><b>Volunteer-based and youth-driven:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Hosts are not compensated (except for small stipends as requested)—this has powerful meaning to many youth who have come out of the foster care system;</li> <li>■ Youth choose to apply, read the files of the hosts and let us know if they want to meet them, and no ‘placement’ language is used;</li> <li>■ Youth have more information about prospective hosts than hosts do about youth, initially minimizing the inherent power imbalance.</li> </ul> <p><b>Does not receive government funding:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Fewer ‘strings attached;’</li> <li>■ Funding streams and trends do not shape the program;</li> <li>■ Program staff and community are able to define and explore programming changes with much more freedom and flexibility.</li> </ul> <p><b>Does not license homes:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Program staff and community get to say who can and cannot become hosts, and what kind of physical space is appropriate to be a host home;</li> <li>■ Program staff and community are able to say who can and cannot be a youth participant;</li> <li>■ We can make exceptions about all the above, and thus be exceptional.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Small, community-driven:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Smaller program capacity.</li> </ul> <p><b>Volunteer-based:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Hosts are not compensated (except for small stipends as requested), which means that only certain people can afford to be hosts, typically in Minnesota, those who are White and middle-class.</li> </ul> <p><b>Does not receive government funding:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Funded solely through individual donations and private foundations.</li> </ul> <p><b>Does not license homes:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Minors can be in host homes only if a DOPA is signed by a parent or guardian; however, we have had a few minors in host homes without DOPAs (these have been rare exceptions, which depended on unusual circumstances);</li> <li>■ The child welfare system does not see our program as an available referral housing option, though it does identify our host homes as the best place for many minors in its care, and occasionally asks if we have hosts willing to go through its foster care training to become foster parents for a specific young person. We are vocal about our frustration with this, but in working our hardest to find the best solutions for youth, we must deal with the system as it currently operates.</li> </ul>

## GLBT HHP Evaluation

Avenues worked with the Wilder Research Foundation to develop assessment and evaluation tools using surveys to help us evaluate the quality of the experiences youth and hosts have in the program. The evaluation surveys were made available on our website a few years ago, allowing youth and hosts to complete them in their own time frame. The program manager also sends out occasional emails with the link to those surveys. However, we do not receive sufficient information through these tools. Most qualitative feedback we receive is through informal conversations and engagement with participants.

We report annually on the following quantitative outcomes:

- *Outcome 1:* Secure 5 additional host homes annually;
- *Outcome 2:* Support up to 10 youth in host homes at any given time;
- *Outcome 3:* Youth will transition into stable housing:
  - Measurement A: 75% will move into their own housing or other supportive housing;
  - Measurement B: 75% of those will continue to have stable housing at one-year follow-up.

In addition, GLBT HHP continues its commitment to the following two outcomes:

- *Outcome 4:* Support creation of host home programs in other communities by providing consultation and sharing information resources,
- *Outcome 5:* Seek to end homelessness through prevention strategies, such as community engagement and social justice advocacy.

## Lessons Learned

The biggest mistake we made in 1997 was focusing solely on sexual orientation and gender identity, with minimal awareness of the intersectionality of identities and experiences. Since most queer individuals in leadership or organizing positions at the time were White, able-bodied and middle-class, this is not particularly surprising. Our community of stakeholders and potential hosts was mostly looking only at homophobia, transphobia and family rejection as pathways to homelessness, even though most queer and trans youth experiencing homelessness were also youth of colour, or were poor, or both.

The disproportionate focus on youth who were kicked out of their family homes because of their sexuality/gender identity meant that we were unintentionally creating a hierarchy of those who ‘deserved’ our support (youth kicked out of their homes) and those who did not ‘deserve’ our support (youth whose families were historically under-resourced, precariously housed, etc.). We did not centre racial and economic justice in our work.

### **Listening Sessions<sup>3</sup>**

We intentionally invited people with a wide range of identities, and positive and negative experiences with hosts and/or the program, to take part in the August 2016 listening sessions. Four questions were asked on flip chart sheets that past and current youth (n=6) and hosts (n=4) responded to in small groups. The questions included:

1) What brought you to the GLBT Host Home Program? 2) What worked well for you? 3) What was challenging for you? and 4) If someone were to start a new Host Home Program, what information would you want them to consider?

A flip chart sheet was also added as a ‘Bike Rack’ for any additional information or thoughts people wanted to share. After small-group work, participants went around individually to each flip chart sheet and starred major points of consensus, check-marked shared experiences and added to the responses before they came back to a large-group debriefing. No program staff were present, to encourage complete honesty. Flip chart sheets were photographed and transcribed. The following section is a summary of flip chart and large-group responses.

### **Past and Current Youth Listening Session Summary**

The six people in this group ranged in age from 20 to 36 years, and included a past participant from when the program was at YouthLink. It also included one of the authors of this chapter, who was a youth participant in 2008. Youth participants reported histories of personal and generational trauma, substance abuse and mental health struggles by

---

<sup>3</sup> A special thank you to Angie Brown, a previous GLBT HHP Advisory Council member, for facilitating and recording the listening sessions, and deep gratitude to the past and present youth and hosts for sharing their insights and experiences.

parents, and abandonment, homophobia and transphobia as some of the key sources of their housing instability and homelessness.

When asked to recall how they were initially connected to GLBT HHP, participants identified youth workers or case managers, mental health providers, word of mouth and resource materials as the main sources of connection and information, which is consistent with the overall history of the program.<sup>4</sup>

The feedback regarding what worked well was also consistent, especially around the connection of shared identities, emotional stability, resources and self-care (“weed” and “I worked well for me!” were two of the responses), matching process (“I liked seeing their criminal record”), program support, the importance and novelty of day-to-day living with other queer folks and sharing respective communities. One youth stated that the hosts “being TBLGQ made them more trustworthy.”<sup>5</sup> Another shared that it was “incredible being connected to an adult who was so much more stable/psychologically healthy than family.” Seemingly small gestures were also listed, such as the hosts inviting the youth to a Thanksgiving dinner and asking the youth if they wanted to bring a friend as well. One youth highlighted basic needs by succinctly writing, “a warm bed.”

The challenging elements of the GLBT HHP experiences that were shared through writing during this session similarly supported the anecdotal feedback we have heard throughout our history: navigating complex race, identity and power dynamics, differing expectations, perceived double standards and hypocrisy (“when you are over 18 and your hosts are smoking weed and they have a problem with you drinking beer”), differing communication styles (“passive-aggressive bullshit like host sending an email to remind me of rules, etc. rather than talking to me,” and “family’s style was explosive vs. hosts were pretty chill”), and dealing with financial hardships (“hosts taking youth to restaurants when youth is unable to pay and don’t want to rely on hosts to pay for them”).

---

<sup>4</sup>Occasionally we hear from family members who are looking for resources for a young person. For example, in 1999, a mother contacted the program manager wanting to explore the possibility of her trans son moving into a host home in the Twin Cities. She and her husband, who lived in a small town about 5 hours away, knew very little of LGBTQ2S issues and identities, but knew their child needed to be somewhere where nobody knew him, free from the harassment and violence he was experiencing in his small community, where everyone knew he had been assigned female status at birth. The program was able to help the 15-year-old boy (who also had little awareness of LGBTQ2S communities) move into a host home in Minneapolis for 6 months, while his parents sold their home, quit their jobs, relocated to another state and then had their son move back in with them.

<sup>5</sup>Hosts do not have to identify as LGBTQ2S to be hosts, but they must be allies.

Here are the remaining challenges identified by the participants that are pertinent to race, identity and relational power that need to be shared and heard:

- “Being black in a white family”;
- “Having a host who isn’t LGBTQP community”;
- “Being a different race/culture from my host; it was hard to have intercultural understanding”;
- “Lack of trans acceptance—they weren’t all nice/understanding”;
- “Time is something brown people are extremely flexible with”;
- “Any religious/spiritual intolerance [e.g., being Muslim in Christian household]”;
- “Sobriety and straight edge life [of their host]”;
- “Going from house to house because hosts don’t trust you”;
- “Being shown off like a homeless prize pig”.

The last question centred on what recommendations they would make to others thinking of starting an HHP, which engendered answers on the need to recruit hosts who can view hosting through a social justice lens. Hosts need to be intentionally anti-oppressive, anti-racist and LGBTQ2S-friendly and competent. Communities need to have an awareness campaign focusing on racial justice issues and the recruitment of people of colour as hosts. The program needs a strong training and educational component for White and non-queer, non-trans hosts.

Youth participants also talked about the need for a solid infrastructure, sustainable funding and donors, and strong community support. Lastly, there were recommendations for dedicated case management, social and support opportunities for youth in the program, effective connections and partnerships with trusted mental health and chemical dependency services, life skills programming (on communication, budgeting, listening, problem-solving), and a practice of revisiting progress and celebrating milestones for both hosts and youth.

The larger-group debriefings underscored the need to restructure *recruitment* of hosts (i.e., recruit more hosts of colour), as well as strengthen the *training* of hosts in White privilege and anti-racism, cultural competency and anti-transphobia. The *screening* of hosts also needs to be robust to ensure hosts will not create more harm than good, specifically around power and privilege. For several youth, coping mechanisms, such as smoking weed, were helpful in dealing with trauma and stress. Having hosts who understood *harm reduction* and were sensitive and accommodating was vital for youth in facilitating healing and gaining



stability. Most of the group participants also said that when hosts initially checked with them and asked questions, the youth would say yes to anything because they needed a place to stay. They recommended that hosts be ready to give youth the space and time to settle in, but also invite them to participate in events with family and friends, as that helped them feel welcomed and connected. Essentially, the message was that *trust-building takes time*.

## **Past and Current Hosts Listening Session Summary**

When hosts were asked what brought them to GLBT HHP, they identified the program manager, media stories (e.g., a radio interview about youth homelessness), and information at a conference where GLBT HHP had a table. Hosts also identified connecting to the ‘simplicity’ of the concept of sharing resources, being in solidarity with the LGBTQ2S community and loving youth, but not wanting to parent. Furthermore, the awareness of the need for supportive housing for young adults and a connection to the issues that many LGBTQ2S youth experience (e.g., suicide rates) contributed to the reasons why people became hosts. One host wrote, “I was homeless at 18.”

When asked what worked well, the examples centred on programming support such as home visits, the monthly support group, social events for the GLBT HHP community (e.g., free tickets to various events), resources provided by the program, case management provided for youth, and staff’s flexibility to “experiment and adapt,” as well as staff’s experiences and perspectives. Being able to talk with other hosts (both before and during hosting) was also listed as something that worked well. Additionally, hosts said their own personal work helped, such as doing couples therapy with their partner, family night with youth (“forced fun!”), being clear about non-negotiables and how to communicate them, and being flexible. One host stated, “We actually really liked each other—when no drama present.”

The answers written down on the “What was challenging for you?” flip chart included: sharing and negotiating physical space and time with youth; relationships with youth; reactions to youths’ coping behaviours; stress of suicide attempts by youth; self-awareness (“learning our own triggers”) and self-care; feeling out of depth and ineffective; working on the relationship with one’s partner while hosting; and managing expectations. One host shared that one challenge was feeling “pushed into hosting before ready because a youth was on a housing deadline (wanted a few months after training).”

Below are some specific additional challenges recorded:

- “How to uphold house rules that I wished were non-negotiable in theory, but in practice weren’t/I didn’t want them to be the only consequence option was then moving out, no other nonparental way of enforcing (I didn’t want the role of parent/enforcer)”;
- “The amount of lying/fibbing”;
- “Watching as they self-sabotage”;
- “Youth issues beyond my scope, program’s scope, or youth’s ability or choice to deal with them”;
- “I was prepared for an aloof teen, and they were uber-attached”;
- “Answering their question of “Why can’t I just keep living here without the program? I’ll pay rent...””.

The last question elicited recommendations that touched on resources and services, training and support, expectations and assumptions, and solidarity and sustainability, such as:

- “More holistic support for the younger youth who haven’t lived independently yet”;
- “Pre-emptive mental health support for youth”;
- “Strong social workers for youth are crucial”;
- “Remember that a sense of solidarity is necessary for success”;
- “Training for hosts should be ROBUST”;
- “Support for hosts should be ROBUST”;
- “Support for youth/hosts—might be needed in off hours”;
- “Explain that young folks may not be excited to be in the program”;
- “I felt supported by and able to reach Rocki [program manager] in crisis, but didn’t feel like there was anyone else to take the problems for/from me, I was alone in implementation. Felt like something beyond what I signed up for.”;
- “Access to transportation and communication (bus/transit and phone)”.

During the group debriefings, current and past hosts expressed concerns about the sustainability of the program, as the current GLBT HHP manager, who was the founding staff member was vital to their success with the program, as both resource and support throughout. Discussion during the group debriefings also underscored the need for more training for hosts. Hosts discussed the shared training of hosts with the Minneapolis and Suburban Host Home Programs, and recommended either separating the training [this has been done], or having the hosts from the HHPs that are not queer- or trans-specific go through an additional day before the GLBT HHP hosts join for the 16-hour ‘deep dive’ training. Hosts expressed an interest in more training related to substance abuse, mental

health, assessing previous trauma, and the risk of connecting with the youth primarily through a shared sense or experience of trauma.

There was quite a bit of discussion about what role *HHP staff have in 'ending the program' for hosts*. Some hosts set clear timelines (e.g., “we are committing to one year; they have to be out by the end of the year”), and others were less specific about a time frame, but everyone agreed it was challenging to know whether they should be helping the youth apply for other transitional housing. To what extent hosts should be involved in goal-setting and post-HHP plans for the youth seems to be a confusing area for hosts, and sometimes it is unclear who has the onus to do this: is it only the case manager and youth working together, without the host’s involvement?

In addition to more training, all hosts recommended that HHP staff create a list of resources, including telephone numbers and contacts for *suicide hotlines, mental health resources and substance abuse support*. Everyone agreed the program manager was responsive when they called during a crisis, but also agreed a packet of this information during host training would have been helpful, to feel more equipped in the moment of crisis.

## **Questions to Consider if Starting an HHP**

Over the last decade, we have had the opportunity to talk with many people who were exploring the idea of starting an HHP in their communities. Below are some of the questions we encourage considering.

### ***Bigger Picture***

- Who is doing most of the organizing? If it is White LGBTQ2S staff of social service and housing non-profits, how do we create a program that is not charity-based or about ‘saving’ youth from their families and circumstances? How do we create a program that recognizes and intentionally challenges systemic, institutional and historic oppression? White liberalism, though well intentioned, can often become a major roadblock to true change. In other words, how do we most effectively make sense of social services work as part of the solution, while at the same time acknowledging that it is also part of the problem?
- How do we best support youth and work with young people experiencing homelessness while minimizing the impact of power and privilege?

- How do we organize and engage within White queer and trans communities that are resistant to conversations about privilege and racism, but want to do something about youth homelessness?
- How can we support people of colour and Indigenous communities that want to host, but are under-resourced or mistrustful of the non-profit system?
- How do we talk to or challenge funders about all of this?

### ***Smaller Picture***

- How will the initial recruitment of hosts happen? How will ongoing recruitment happen?
- When youth are minors, and a DOPA cannot be signed, how can we work with them without engaging the child welfare system?
- What are the risks of having minors who are not in the child welfare system in host homes without a DOPA?
- Can a queer/trans-specific host home program be considered an option for youth in the system without being a licensed program? How can we partner with the system without becoming a licensed program?

## **Conclusion**

Since the GLBT HHP inception in 1997, we have heard similar themes highlighted during the listening sessions. We have heard about lives changed, magical moments, messy relationships, and the relief and possibilities that come when basic needs are met, as well as about the challenges of building trust and communicating across different assumptions, expectations and identities. Though the main goal of GLBT HHP is to provide homes for youth who need them (the tangible expectations of hosts is that they provide food and shelter), what makes the experience of hosting and being hosted magical and messy is the stuff of human relationships, of hopes and dreams, beliefs and values, culture and commitment, vulnerability and power, and so much more.

Any response to queer and trans youth homelessness must examine and challenge oppression, especially in relation to Whiteness and racial disparities within our LGBTQ2S communities. It is essential that we minimize the mess that is borne out of unexamined power and privilege, such as allowing White applicants to become hosts if they are not willing and able to commit to racial justice. We must be vigilant about noticing the deep chasm that often separates good *intent* (sharing one's home with a youth) from its painful

impact (e.g., a youth feeling like a ‘homeless prize pig’ to be shown off). It is also crucial to continually examine the leadership and sustainability of our responses and organizations. It is our hope that the information shared here—past mistakes, ongoing struggles, and both the bigger philosophical issues and the smaller concrete ones—can assist individuals and communities who are interested in starting a similar program. Not doing anything because of all the pain, heartache and sweat is not really an option, right? The magic of connection and change still win.

## **About the Authors**

### ***Raquel (Rocki) Simões, MSW, LISW***

Program Manager, GLBT Host Home Program  
Avenues for Homeless Youth  
rsimoes@avenuesforyouth.org

Rocki is a White Brazilian who came to the United States in the late 80s, fell in love with women and rice krispies treats (not necessarily in that order), and decided to stay. Most of her community organizing work has focused on queer youth, homelessness, and racial and social justice. Rocki has been at Avenues for Homeless Youth since 2007 and helped start the GLBT Host Home Program in 1997.

### ***Khalid Adam***

Khalid is a Minneapolis-based graduate student, community organizer, and activist. An avid billiards player, you will find him at his local pool hall (when he is not studying).

