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Trans Formed: To Be Homeless & Transgender

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The night my church opened its 10-bed homeless shelter for 18-to-24-year-olds, I volunteered to supervise them. A novice to any kind of shelter experience, I was nervous as I dragged my red cart with pillow and blanket to the church, and grateful that Mina, an elegant, 70-something social worker, also would be there.

Six young people arrived in a clump at 10 p.m., clutching pillows and belongings and, in one case, a teddy bear. They came from Sylvia's Place, an overcrowded downtown shelter. One woman, wearing a do-rag under a baseball cap, surprised me with a quick hug. In the coming months, she would outline the danger she felt in our relatively safe-seeming Manhattan neighborhood, how every time she walked outside she'd hear some comment, how she was hit in the face just waiting for the bus.

But that night we didn't talk much. I fussed around, putting out food and setting up beds. After midnight, when everyone else was asleep, Mina wrapped herself in a blanket and propped herself on a chair against the wall. I stayed awake in the kitchen, by the light, reading. The next morning we woke everyone at 8 and ushered them out, still groggy, into the icy February air. I walked home past restaurants that looked newly exclusive and out of reach. Overwhelmed by the luxury of it all, I crawled under my thick yellow duvet and slept.

That was more than two years ago. During a recent weekend work retreat, my teaching colleagues and I were drinking cappuccino when I mentioned our shelter is for LGBT young adults.

"LGB -- what?" asked Pat, an elementary school teacher.

LGBT -- lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender -- has been in use only since the 1990s, and even those familiar with the abbreviation may have little understanding of what the last term means. My colleagues asked me to define it.

Let me try: Trans means "across, beyond or through," as in translate, or transfer. Gender, like genre, means "kind or sort." A transgender person moves across gender. The term is applied to those whose gender identity does not match the gender they were assigned at birth. They may or may not have been surgically or hormonally treated, or want to be. They may simply feel they are male rather than female, or vice versa, and so dress and act accordingly.

I -- straight and white -- still have a long way to go toward understanding what it means, inside and out, to be transgender. "Are you okay hugging me even though I'm black?" one of the shelter's guests asked me, registering a minute hesitation on my part. "You don't know the half of it," I thought wryly. But as I got to know her and the other shelter residents, my unease dissipated.

This tall, African American transgender woman speaks with a slight Texas drawl and favors tan slacks. She is brilliant -- the kind of person who learned to speak French watching "Sex and the City" on DVD by changing the language function. Last summer she won a full scholarship to a New England college, where she is pursuing a degree in international business. But when she came "home" to her cot in our church basement on break, she told me the students at her college don't really talk to her: "Their eyes kind of glaze over, you know?"

Another transgender woman shared her autobiography with me, a two-page testament on college-ruled paper, in which she described being raped at age 12 and beatings by her foster father. "You are so nice," she once told me, tapping me playfully on the shoulder, "and I ought to know."

One day she arrived at the shelter in terrible shape. She had been followed and attacked, unprovoked, near Times Square in the middle of the day. Our pastor arranged for her to stay inside that day, and after the reconstructive facial surgery that followed.

An analysis of available research done by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force suggests that between 20 and 40 percent of all homeless youth identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. These young people clearly experience homelessness at a disproportionate rate, given that only between 3 and 5 percent of the total U.S. population identify as LGBT.

Thousands of them make their way to New York City looking for a safe haven after coming out to unhappy receptions at home. There are only about 100 beds in the city designated specifically for this population, who often experience abuse in other shelters, such as one resident who said he was urinated on. Mainstream churches are beginning to open their doors, including the year-round transitional shelter at my church, Trinity Lutheran, on the Upper West Side of Manhattan.

The 55 youths who have stayed there for varying lengths of time have come from all over the world: Amsterdam, Nevada, Alaska, England and the Bronx. We have heard some of their stories: the teenager who took to the streets at age 13 after he was stabbed with a fork by his mother when he told her he was gay; the girl who was raped by her father's friend to "straighten her out" after she confessed to liking girls.

I coordinate the volunteers who relieve our shelter monitor on his night off. These days I do my occasional overnight alone. The young people who come to our shelter are screened and referred from other shelters in the city. Residents are required to be working, actively seeking employment, or in school. Living in a church basement is no one's idea of an end goal, yet sometimes it is enough to help a marginalized young person grow into the "independent, positive and productive adult" envisioned in our mission statement.

One henna-haired woman changed my view of our church basement as a dead end. This young woman passes out leaflets for a Rite Aid in Queens. She calls me "Miss" and enthusiastically identifies herself as bisexual. "It's so great, Miss, 'cause I have boyfriends and girlfriends! I love everybody!" She loves everybody to a fault, buying clothes and phone cards for her friends. We give her a weekly fare card so she can get to and from work, but saving her own money has been a challenge. As we made apple pie together one night, I commented on her apple-slicing technique. She confided that she learned to peel and slice apples during two years in prison. For her, our shelter was definitely a step up.

Often, however, living there is not enough to repair deep wounds: A sensitive 21-year-old man from the Bronx who was studying for his GED disappeared. A delicate Latino woman from Arizona, who plays the piano beautifully, was arrested by an undercover cop for selling drugs and entered an endless string of court dates that felt like a vortex from which she would never emerge.

I no longer juxtapose my life against theirs, as I did on that first night, but try to see them more on their own terms. More often than not they are philosophical, cleareyed and remarkably resilient in the face of the most intense rejection imaginable. Acronyms and labels are dissolving as individual faces become distinct.

At dinner with my colleagues, I tried to articulate how these young people affect me when I arrive for an overnight: They have no family support and no permanent place to stay, I tell the other teachers, and yet they ask me how I am.

It's hard to explain -- just as the spectrum of gender is hard to explain. Parents' and society's rejection of children who don't fit the norm is hard to explain, too. But most confounding of all is the forbearance these young people have in the face of intolerance and cruelty. They go -- like

the definition of trans -- "across, beyond and through" preconceptions. They are unlike anyone I have encountered before.