



## The future of LGBT activism in place

Recent Campus Pride camp grad Josh Roer wants change - and he's not afraid to get in your face to get it

*by Jessica Carreras*

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Josh Roer probably won't ever be the executive director of an LGBT rights organization. He may not ever run a place like the Ruth Ellis Center or be the chair of a pride planning board. In fact, the Western Michigan University senior, who is majoring in biochemistry, said he wants to work with animals and do "a bunch of other bio-geeky stuff."

But that doesn't mean he can't be an activist, too.

From July 19-24, 21-year-old Roer joined 59 other LGBT young adults at Campus Pride's Leadership Camp at Towson University in Maryland. There, he spent a week listening to speakers, attending workshops, networking and learning how to continue to become one of the LGBT leaders of the future.

There, highlights included speakers like national civil rights leader and transgender advocate Donna Rose, "Coming Out Spiritually" author Christian DeLaHuerta and author Jessica Pettitt. Workshops were conducted by organizations like the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, the **National Gay and Lesbian Task Force** and the Trevor Project.

The campers also enjoyed performances by world-renowned drag king D.R.E.D., slam poet Emanuel Xavier and singer Randi Driscoll.

Roer attended as one of six students from Michigan universities, joined by Tom Wesley from the University of Michigan-Dearborn, Jasmine Stock from Eastern Michigan University and Sasha Cowan, Vanessa Johnson and David Topping of WMU. Topping, Johnson, Cowan and Roer are all part of WMU's Gay-Straight Alliance, OUTspoken. Sarah Stangl, who heads up the school's LGBT Student Services, chose the four students to attend the camp with money provided by a grant from the Arcus Foundation. "She sends the prominent leaders - people she thinks are the most well behaved, the most able to handle the material - to different conferences each year," explains Roer.

Roer jumped at the opportunity. Though he was a little nervous when he started college, the Ferndale native quickly found his niche in LGBT issues on campus. "It was no big deal coming out in Ferndale, but coming to Western, I was a little anxious," he admits. "I wanted to actually meet some different people and feel what the campus climate was like."

After joining OUTspoken's Facebook group, Roer was contacted by the president of the group in an effort to get more people to join the organization. Roer accepted the invitation. "I was hooked ever since because it was really fun, really good people and a very safe, comfortable environment," he says of being a part of OUTspoken.

Now, he's their incoming president for the next school year. It's a role he says he's more than prepared for - thanks, in part, to participating in the Creating Change conference in February in Detroit, GenderPAC's Gender Youth Coalition and, most recently, Campus Pride's camp.

At the camp, Roer says he learned about current issues facing the community, including the Employment Non-Discrimination Act. Learning about the exclusion of transgender people from the bill, he says, was upsetting. But, in the true nature of an up-and-coming leader, Roer doesn't plan on dwelling or pointing fingers. "What's done is done," he says thoughtfully. "There's nothing we can do about it at this point other than reflect, fix those connections and work on making a more inclusive bill.

"Just because it's written doesn't mean it's the only one that we can use."

The poignant opinion is one that Roer gives without hesitation. Raised by his mother in a divorced family, he was encouraged to be outspoken and independent; never being afraid to give his opinion - as long as he was willing to back up his words with action.

Although not a career, activism was a clear choice as a passion. In addition to running WMU's GSA, Roer speaks in classes about LGBT issues and is adamant about transgender inclusiveness. "This is where I belong," he says of activism. "I'm loud. I get in people's faces." As such, he looks forward to going back to Campus Pride's Leadership Camp - hopefully as a leader.

Roer sees the upcoming role of young gays and lesbians and wants to be a part of it. "I think the role of youth is that we're going to have to not just come out, but be out," he explains. "...I feel we need to be more direct in our actions and not settle for dropping trans-inclusiveness off of a bill or not allowing anything to be pushed aside."

So while most 21-year-olds are deciding which party or bar to go to (though Roer does admit to enjoying his nights out: "When I come back home, I make sure it's Friday before 7, I round up my friends and we head to Necto"), his heart lies in activism. "It's just second nature to me," he says. "If I see something I don't agree with, I don't just say OK, write it down and move on. I question, I ask and if I still don't agree with it, I change it. It's just kind of the way I've always been."

Thanks, in part, to mom, who Roer credits for his proactive disposition. "She instilled in all of us that if you don't like something, don't complain about it," he says. "Get up and change it."