

Homeless Shelter Workers in Midwestern Urban Centers

Archie Green Fellows Project AFC2016034

Oral History of Raquel (Rocki) Simoes, Program Manager with Avenues for Homeless Youth

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Summary of Interview

Raquel (Rocki) Simoes works as the Program Manager for the Gay-Lesbian-Bisexual-Transgender (GLBT) Host Home Program for the nonprofit, Avenues for Homeless Youth. Rocki offices at 771 Raymond Ave Street, St Paul, MN 55114, but her work is throughout the greater Twin Cities metropolitan area. The main office for Avenues for Homeless Youth is located at 7210 76th Avenue North, Brooklyn Park, Minnesota, 55428.

This interview took place in a meeting room at the Walker Library, located at 2880 Hennepin Avenue, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 55408.

Interview Log

- 00:00:01 Introduction
- 00:00:13 Job title and description; Program Manager for the Gay-Lesbian-Bisexual-Transgender (GLBT) Host Home Program for the nonprofit, Avenues for Homeless Youth (Avenues); Avenues has four host home programs, two of which are queer/trans-specific; Rocki is manager of the oldest one, which offers longer-term host homes; the other two are suburban host home programs;
- 00:01:46 History of the need for host homes; early-mid '90s; people noticed that programs for homeless GLBT youth were not addressing their specific needs, such as:
- Youth feeling they could not be “out” about their identity;
 - Youth lacking confidence in staff respecting that identity;
 - Staff not stopping homophobic or transphobic language from guests or other staff;
 - Respect and safety for trans youth in a shelter system that is gendered—that is, male beds and female beds;
- Due to this, GLBT youth would not stay in shelter as long, so remained homeless longer without access to services; monthly group of workers and community members called “Partnership for GLBT Youth” met at District 202 to look at resources and needs; Matt Halley was the first openly GLBT individual hired specifically to work with GLBT youth in the Twin Cities metro at Youthlink; Richard Wayman was also a member; host home program was developed by this group based on the model used by The Center in Denver, Colorado; homelessness not on the radar of national GLBT rights groups at this point;
- 00:11:47 Rocki hired Fall 1996 by Youthlink’s Project Offstreets Program of the Minneapolis Youth Diversion Program; Rocki is from Brazil; discussion of status; Masters of Social Work; received her green card under a “special interest waiver” due specifically to her work with queer and transgender youth; April 1997, the first young person moved into a host home;

- 00:14:04 Description of how a host home works; her job is to recruit, screen, train, and support adults who volunteer to host; hosts don't have to be queer or trans, but the majority are; they open their homes to a young person; average stay about a year; longest stay close to four years; shortest stay a couple weeks; the program is intentionally outside the system and doesn't use government funding; it's intentionally not foster care because youth leaving traditional foster care too frequently become homeless; young people get to choose the host home; participants today are ages 16-24-years-old; hosts apply, write letter for youth to make a choice; youth can also see background information such as criminal check; in these ways the balance of power is flipped from traditional foster care; hosts have very little information about the youth;
- Rocki is more the case manager for the hosts; another youth worker is the case manager for the youth; home visits done monthly;
- Intentionally keep the program small; no more than ten active host homes at one time; Rocki shares the model and encourages others to start other small host home programs; belief that GLBT host home model works because it was community-driven;
- 00:22:45 Discussion of the error of lack of focus on racial justice in the 1990s planning; Minnesota as a state largely Caucasian and with history of charity rather than justice; white liberalism; majority of queer and transgender youth who are experiencing homeless are youth of color while hosts are typically white, middle-class people; planners assumed the program would be for GLBT youth who had been kicked out of their homes—this is the most common narrative about homeless GLBT youth: parents kicked them out for being GLBT; but there are also queer and trans youth who are loved by their parents but are living in poverty, creating a hierarchy of valuing kicked out youth over homeless youth in poor families who become homeless for economic reasons; demonizing families rather than demonizing systems;
- 00:31:55 Discussion of how youth come into the program; differs among populations; juvenile justice systems; chemical dependency facilities; self-referrals; other organizations who would provide case management while the youth was in a Host Home program; school counselor referral; variety of creative ways of providing case management, including volunteers;
- 00:36:57 Discussion of funding and funding cuts and impact on program; Rocki's move from Youthlink to Avenues for Homeless Youth; a United Way "Arise Project" grant enables them to hire case managers; youth can decide if they want to keep a supportive adult in their life;
- 00:42:21 Specific discussion about 16-17 year old program participants; there is not an emancipation process; parent/guardian has to sign a Delegation of Parental Authority (DOPA) to be in the Host Home program; have also had 15-year-olds in the program; story of a youth where a judge signed the DOPA as being in the youth's best interest; generally not seen as a referral source for wards of the state because its outside the system, not licensed;
- 00:45:26 More details about how the program works: Rocki and co-worker Ryan practice "old school community organizing"; attending events; speaking opportunities; Rocki thinks of herself more as an activist rather than a licensed social worker; word of mouth is an important tool; hosts are interviewed twice, sometimes three times, references, criminal background checks and sixteen hours of training over a weekend; focus on youth issues, but also issues the hosts may have such as power dynamics and/or racial privilege; story of an applicant who was unwilling to look at his own privilege; reasons host applicants aren't ready to host;
- 00:51:19 Expectations of hosts: housing and food, but also good communications, boundaries, and flexibility; Rocki views her role as half supporting host parents and half challenging them;

- help them understand normal teen behavior or trauma or survival, or the hosts own issues; host trainings include documentaries, “Homeless Youth: Finding Home” made by Twin Cities Public Television and the Wilder Foundation and “The Infamous T” by filmmaker Melissa Cook;
- 00:59:00 Aside about “The Infamous T”; discussion of how social services can exploit young people’s stories; Rocki prefers artists or external individuals that help youth tell their own stories, such as Kulture Klub; story about working with Melissa Cook and Jonathon, the focus of “The Infamous T” and his experiences, including with the Host Home Program;
- 01:06:18 Included in the training is someone who talks about positive youth development and trauma and resiliency; trans 101; white privilege; panel of individuals serving as existing host home parents; panel of young people who were or are in the program;
- 01:11:53 Defining success in the program; story of a former host’s definition of success in the program; the program goal is that for “x” months, the young person didn’t have to worry about food or shelter; graduating from high school, getting a job, saving money, improved relationships are the icing on the cake;
- 01:13:39 Types of host homes; a closet-turned-bedroom for short-term; sleeping on the couch; licensure would not enable these types of situations even though the youth may choose it over other options;
- 01:16:23 Discussion of current availability of shelter for youth in the Twin Cities Metro; not enough; Avenues for Homeless Youth has two shelters: 20 beds in North Minneapolis and 12 beds in Brooklyn Park; in Minneapolis, providers of youth shelter include The Bridge, Hope Street Shelter, Ain Dah Yung in St. Paul; permanent and transitional programs include Youthlink’s Barnabas, Archdale, Nicollet Square;
- 01:18:08 Discussion of the need to support families rather than demonize the families of homeless GLBT youth; story about a phone call from a greater Minnesota mom of a transgender youth;
- 01:22:37 Discussion of whether this work will continue; Rocki notes that young people are more savvy about intersectionality, and identity; her daughter’s role in Black Lives Matter; Trump administration, misogyny, sexism, privilege; charity vs. solidarity; foresees more authentic movements that aren’t about single issues;
- 01:26:15 Regarding the future of homelessness/housing, hopes to see more responses that are “outside the system”; the need for creativity in community responses balanced with rules, “best practices” or funders requiring certain outcomes; trusting community responses;
- 01:29:39 Discussion about United Way funding requirements, funder reports; Rocki reports on: getting five new host homes every year to maintain 20-25 homes; three trainings per year; ten young people in host homes at any given time; 75% of youth move into other stable housing;
- 01:33:12 End