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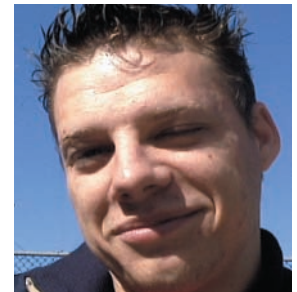
NATIONAL CENTER FOR LESBIAN RIGHTS

A DVD AND RESOURCE CD

# Breaking the Silence:

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Foster Youth Tell Their Stories

*A Tool for Training Care Providers on Working Effectively with LGBTQ Youth*



## DVD VIEWING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE

This guide provides an introduction to each story to assist in determining which stories best meet training or screening goals. The guide also identifies some of the themes of each story, defines relevant vocabulary, and presents thought-provoking questions to broaden understanding of these youths' experiences and insights, as well as provide opportunities for deeper appreciation and learning. One of the key educational aspects of *Breaking the Silence* is that while there are many common themes which appear throughout the ten stories, each individual story also presents its own unique perspectives.

# NICKY

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## “Tradition bound me. Tradition kept me silent.”

### Overview



Nicky, the oldest child in a wealthy, traditional Asian family, was physically abused by her parents—and the abuse escalated after she came out to her family. Nicky’s parents cited Chinese tradition and Buddhist teachings to justify the beatings, but Nicky can see how their particular interpretations of cultural and religious traditions stem in part from their own history of abuse. When she was placed in a foster care facility, Nicky’s peers continued to abuse her, and her social workers did nothing to address this persistent bullying and harassment. Finally, Nicky has found the strength to become an activist and advocate for other foster youth. **Running Time 4:32**

### What this story illustrates

- The roles that cultural and religious traditions can play in some families’ abuse and rejection of LGBTQ youth
- The harmful effects of peer harassment in group home settings and the importance of adequate adult responses to bullying
- Hope and self-affirmation through positive relationships

### Discussion Questions

1. Why did Nicky enter foster care? How is Nicky’s entrance to foster care similar to or different from youth who are not LGBTQ?
2. What specific needs did she have once in foster care because of these differences?
3. How could the teasing and harassment Nicky experienced in foster care have been handled differently? What sorts of programs could have been offered to Nicky or to the other foster youth in her placement?
4. When Nicky was removed from her family, her family was not provided help to address their homophobia. What services or programs could have been offered to Nicky’s family that might have helped them understand and accept their child?

# JEREMY (aka REMY)

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## “How is a sixteen-year-old supposed to know what no one ever talks about?”

### Overview



When Remy’s foster mother found out he was gay, he turned to his trusted social worker for help. Unfortunately, his story ended up landing him in juvenile hall after he was arrested for a crime he didn’t even know he was committing. He was made to feel perverted and inhuman simply for having a consensual relationship with a younger boyfriend. With the help of advocates and friends, he has moved beyond the pain of this legal encounter and learned to affirm his own identity. **Running Time 4:00**

### What this story illustrates

- The double standard under the law for heterosexual and LGBTQ youth
- The importance of education and allowing space for youth to ask questions, to know their rights, and to know the law

### Vocabulary and Context

**Lewd acts:** any conduct that is considered indecent or offensive. It is an umbrella term that refers to a variety of illicit sexual conduct, including prostitution, pornography, or sexual abuse. In this case, the laws in Remy’s state consider all consensual sexual activity between minors unlawful. Whether charges are filed against a particular youth is determined by the prosecutor. Often, when the minors involved are of the same sex, they are treated more harshly. For Remy, it is unclear why the prosecutors finally dropped the charges.

### Discussion Questions

1. Why did Remy tell his social worker rather than his foster mother about being gay? How could these adults have made it safer for him to come out?
2. Why didn’t Remy know he was committing a crime?
3. Why would a young gay couple be treated differently than a young heterosexual couple who found themselves in the same situation Remy did?
4. What could have been done to help Remy before he got into trouble with the law?

# CAPTAIN

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**“I am black. I am woman. I am queer. Those three sisters make me the man I am today.”**

## Overview



There is no simple label that Captain can use to describe himself, although those around him often feel compelled to find one. Captain was beaten by his aunt who believed he was “possessed by gender and sexuality demons.” In foster care, he was also pressured to define himself, but he refused to be so narrowly labeled. He simply and boldly lives as Captain. **Running Time 4:14**

## What this story illustrates

- The struggle of transgender and gender non-conforming youth to have others accept their gender identity
- The ways that a youth’s multiple identities may relate and/or conflict
- The universality of the struggle to embrace the many sides of who we are

## Vocabulary and Context

**Gender Identity:** a person’s internal, deeply-felt sense of being male, female, something other, or in between. Everyone has a gender identity.

**Queer:** a word that was originally a derogatory term for ‘gay, lesbian, or bisexual,’ and that is now being reclaimed by some lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons as a self-affirming identity.

## Discussion Questions

1. How does Captain understand the relationship of the “three sisters” that comprise him? How do these identities contradict one another? And yet how are they all integral parts of who Captain is?
2. Why did Captain’s aunt and foster mother consider it necessary for Captain to define himself as a girl?
3. What do you think Captain is asking people to do when he says, “Close your eyes and your ears and open your hearts”?
4. What does Captain mean when he says there is no word to describe him in the English language? How can labels be restrictive or divisive—and how is this sometimes harmful?

# GEORGE

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**“It became my true sanctuary, a place where people actually cared about me, a place where I was free to express myself.”**

## Overview



George was abandoned by his father at the age of five, and then endured years of verbal abuse from family and friends while under the care of his aunt and uncle. Finally, after a brutal encounter with a teacher at school, he ran away to the streets of Hollywood, where he worked as a prostitute, while searching for himself and for hope. After two years, he was arrested and eventually given a second chance in a positive and safe group home. Just before his emancipation, a father figure came into his life. Finally, George felt the love of a mentor who believed in him, didn't judge him, and encouraged him to live to his full potential. **Running Time 4:08**

## What this story illustrates

- The need for a safe space for LGBTQ youth in their homes and schools
- The isolation and desperation that leads some youth to life on the streets and to survival crimes like prostitution
- The juvenile justice system and its relation to the child welfare system
- The importance of a foster care facility that is supportive of LGBTQ youth
- The importance of a trusted mentor for LGBTQ youth

## Vocabulary and Context

**Faggot (aka fag):** a derogatory term for a gay or bisexual man. Some gay and bisexual men have reclaimed the term as a positive identity when used among themselves.

**Turning tricks:** a prostitute's work is sometimes referred to as "turning tricks."

**Gay and Lesbian Adolescent Social Services (GLASS):** GLASS, an organization based in West Hollywood, CA runs five licensed group homes for LGBTQ and HIV-positive foster and probation youth.

## Discussion Questions

1. Why did George feel forced to run away?
2. What could have been done to help George avoid the trouble he ran into?
3. In what sense can George now say that prostitution is "not OK" but that it is "understandable"?  
How has George struggled to understand that prostitution doesn't have to define him?
4. How might the police officers and juvenile justice system have treated George differently, given that the streets felt safer to him than home?
5. What made GLASS a true sanctuary for George?
6. What might have happened to George had he not met his mentor?

# KEVIN

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**“My therapist, foster parents, and social worker all rewarded me for acting feminine. I felt like no one let me be how I wanted to be.”**

## Overview



Kevin felt like a boy his whole life, although everyone else continually pressured him to be "normal" and act like a girl. He struggled to please the world around him, but was still teased at school for being different. Finally, he responded in violence and was arrested. It wasn't until someone took the time to listen to him and look at his strengths that he got a new take on his life, and eventually was free to be the man he is today. Running Time 3:38

## What this story illustrates

- The negative effects of peer harassment on LGBTQ youth
- The importance of listening to LGBTQ youth
- The difference that one person can make in the life of an LGBTQ foster youth
- The importance of “making your own family” for youth who feel rejected by their families of origin or their foster families

## Vocabulary and Context

**Dyke:** a derogatory term for a lesbian or bisexual woman. Some lesbians and bisexual women have reclaimed the term as a positive identity when used among themselves.

**Bulldagger:** a derogatory term for a masculine, usually butch lesbian. Some lesbians have reclaimed the term as a positive identity when used among themselves.

**California Youth Authority (CYA):** now known as the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, Division of Juvenile Justice (DJJ). The DJJ is one of the largest youth corrections agencies in the nation, providing services to juvenile offenders in facilities and on parole. The DJJ houses youths sent there for treatment, training, and education.

## Discussion Questions

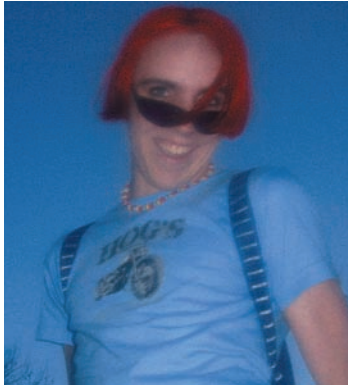
1. How did Kevin's peers learn how to tease him using words many of them, like Kevin, didn't even understand?
2. How did Kevin's foster parents and social worker react to the harassment and bullying he was experiencing? How did that harassment get blamed on Kevin?
3. How could Kevin's outburst at school have been handled differently?
4. What did Kevin's social worker do to help him realize his potential?
5. How did Kevin come to a new understanding of what it means to be “normal”?

# KIRA

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## “My emotions had me trapped in a box.”

### Overview



Kira, a male-to-female (MTF) transgender youth, tells the story of the importance of the "permanent connection" she made with an unlikely person--her heterosexual independent living program (ILP) worker Jasyn. Shortly after they met, Jasyn left ILP but continued to play an important role in Kira's life, inspiring Kira to be the best she can be and supporting Kira through her transition. After Kira was emancipated, Jasyn and her family had to move out of state, but even across the distance Jasyn still serves as a mentor, and a source of love and support for Kira as she enters a world that holds many challenges for transgender youth. **Running Time 3:59**

### What this story illustrates

- How unconditional love and support give LGBTQ youth the freedom to express themselves
- The importance and power of heterosexual allies
- The importance of creating a family where youth feel loved and accepted

### Vocabulary and Context

**Independent Living Program (ILP):** a program that assists youth who are the in the legal custody of the state in preparing to manage adult responsibilities and achieve self-sufficiency and independence once emancipated from the system.

**Ally:** an individual who is not lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender who is supportive of the LGBTQ community. Allies challenge homophobic and heterosexist remarks and behaviors, and are willing to explore and understand forms of bias within themselves.

**Transition:** the process and time period during which a transgender person starts to live in accordance with their gender identity, rather than the gender they were assigned at birth. Often includes a change in style of dress, selection of a new name, and a request that people use the correct pronoun. Transition may, but does not always, include medical care like hormonal therapy, counseling, and/or surgery.

**Male-to-Female (MTF):** indicates the direction of transition for a transgender person whose birth sex is male but whose gender identity is female. The term Female-to-Male (FTM) indicates the direction of transition for a transgender person whose birth sex is female but whose gender identity is male.

### Discussion Questions

1. Why did Kira feel the need to try to “shock” people or be a “wild child”?
2. What made it safe for Kira to explore a range of identities?
3. What did Jasyn do to make Kira feel good about herself?
4. How did Kira's bond with Jasyn help her to feel at home in her new family?

# DANIELLE

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## “I slept with silence.”

### Overview



Danielle knew she was different from the time she was eleven. Her family knew she was a lesbian and rejected her before Danielle even knew what a lesbian was. When Danielle confides in her social worker about a violent experience at the hands of the 32-year-old daughter of her foster parents, she is met with skepticism, forcing her into silence. Alone, she quietly began to understand her identity as a lesbian until, finally, she received much-needed support and affirmation. **Running Time 3:45**

### What this story illustrates

- The struggle of LGBTQ youth to find someone who will listen
- The additional challenges LGBTQ face when dealing with sexual violence
- The pain of some families’ rejection of LGBTQ identities
- The importance of adults or mentors who will affirm youth and their struggles
- How youth can become empowered to help other youth as advocates and activists

### Vocabulary and Context

**Bisexual:** a person who is emotionally, romantically, and sexually attracted to both men and women.

**Ally:** an individual who is not lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender who is supportive of the LGBT community. Allies challenge homophobic and heterosexist remarks and behaviors, and are willing to explore and understand forms of bias within themselves.

**California Youth Connection (CYC):** a program guided, focused, and driven by current and former foster youth with the assistance of other committed community members. CYC promotes the participation of foster youth in policy development and legislative change to improve the foster care system, and strives to improve social work practice and child welfare policy. CYC Chapters in counties throughout California identify local issues and use grassroots and community organizing to create change.

### Discussion Questions

1. What factors drove Danielle into silence?
2. Although there are some lesbian and gay people who sexually assault other people of the same sex, these incidents are no more common than sexual assaults perpetrated by heterosexual people. How did Danielle’s social worker respond to Danielle disclosing that she was sexually assaulted? Do you think the response would have been different if her assailant had been male?
3. What might have helped Danielle to better understand healthy lesbian sexuality at an earlier point?
4. What social pressures led Danielle to identify as bisexual briefly?
5. One of Danielle’s social workers told her that being lesbian was “not right by God.” What could Danielle’s social worker have done differently, without violating her own religious beliefs, when Danielle disclosed that she is a lesbian?
6. What factors have allowed Danielle to become empowered as a youth advocate?



# KELI

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**“Through it all I was scared to say anything and teased when I did. I always knew there was something different about me.”**

## Overview



Severely neglected as a child, a medical miracle brought Keli back to life. She was in and out of foster care in Hawaii, continually abused, and eventually ended up back with her mother, to Keli’s despair. Her brother and her aunt, who also served as her mentors, became her support system as she struggled to heal from her past, and began the inner struggle of finding her identity as a lesbian. **Running Time 3:54**

## What this story illustrates

- The negative effects of peer pressure and the importance of peer affirmation to youth
- The benefits of feeling connected to others, accepted, and loved
- The importance of allies within the family

## Vocabulary and Context

**Butch:** a term some people use to describe a masculine aspect of their gender identity.

**Homophobic:** literally, afraid of homosexuals. Used to describe attitudes, remarks, or behaviors that discriminate against, reject, or hate LGBTQ people.

## Discussion Questions

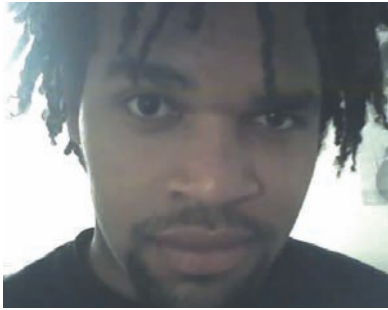
1. In her introduction, Keli says that she doesn’t “act that way”—i.e., openly lesbian—with her extended family out of “respect” for their homophobic beliefs. What does her willingness to compromise show about the strong need to be accepted?
2. What has helped Keli begin a “second life” after her experiences of neglect and abuse both within her family of origin and in foster care?
3. How did the teasing by her peers affect Keli’s coming out process?
4. What could Keli’s teachers or social workers have done to help make school and home safe spaces for Keli to question her sexual orientation?
5. How did Keli’s aunt and cousins give direction and meaning to her life?

# DARRYN

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**“I found myself in the home of my foster mother, Betty. I felt respected, heard, and most of all, appreciated.”**

## Overview



Darryn was born into a broken family. Entering foster care gave him a chance to heal and to be free. He finally had control of his life and was getting much needed support and love from his foster mother. But when he fell in love with his best friend, he struggled with his own fears and misconceptions about homosexuality. Only after leaving foster care has he been able to fully come out to himself, his peers, and his former foster mother. **Running Time 4:38**

## What this story illustrates

- The struggle of LGBTQ youth to find self-affirming positive images
- LGBTQ youth working through their own homophobia
- The importance of a supportive foster family
- The difficulties LGBTQ youth face when coming out

## Discussion Questions

1. What made Betty a good foster parent?
2. Even though Darryn felt supported by her, why do you think he did not feel comfortable coming out to Betty while he was living with her?
3. How did Betty's strength and patience help Darryn eventually come out?
4. How did images of gay men from popular culture make it difficult at first for Darryn to identify as gay?
5. What might have helped Darryn during his coming out experience?
6. How does the storytelling process help Darryn work through his negativity?

# WENDY

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**“Through struggle, I have learned to survive.”**

## Overview



Ms. Aloha, as people like to call Wendy, was abandoned by her mother at age seven and endured years of abuse within the foster care system. She was finally placed with a family, but was forced to leave once they learned she was a lesbian. Through all of this, plus an unforeseen tragedy in her family, she's kept a positive outlook on life, helping all of those around her and learning to thrive on her own.

Running Time 4:06

## What this story illustrates

- LGBTQ youth risk getting kicked out of their foster home if they come out
- The need that strong LGBTQ youth have for appreciation and support

## Discussion Questions

1. What and who could have helped Wendy feel affirmed and appreciated?
2. What might have happened to a different youth, without such personal drive, in the same situation Wendy found herself in?
3. What kind of foster family did Wendy need?
4. How has Wendy's positive attitude and strength helped her to heal? How, at the same time, have they kept others from seeing her own need for support?

# GENERAL DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



1. How are the struggles, needs, and aspirations of LGBTQ youth in foster care similar to those of non-LGBTQ youth in the system? How are they different?
2. What social and cultural factors make LGBTQ youth more likely to enter foster care?
3. How do social or cultural images and prejudices about what it means to be masculine or feminine—or gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender—make it difficult for LGBTQ youth to claim their own identities?
4. What factors make it difficult for LGBTQ youth to come out to their families, their social workers, or their peers? What are some of the consequences of their feeling forced to hide an important aspect of who they are?
5. What characterizes a good foster parent or mentor for LGBTQ youth?
6. Several of the youth embrace multiple identities or talk about going through a series of identities. How can adults who interact with foster youth best support and empower them as they explore their race, culture, gender identity, and sexual orientation?
7. What sorts of education, services, or other programs could help make the child welfare system more safe and welcoming for all youth, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity? How might all youth, LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ benefit from some of these programs?
8. What can help LGBTQ youth find supportive and welcoming peer groups in schools, group homes, or other settings?
9. What services or help can social workers or others provide to the families of LGBTQ youth to help them understand and accept their children?
10. What kinds of additional information, support, or training do you or your colleagues need to help you meet the needs of the LGBTQ youth you interact with?



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**YOUTH PROJECT** has been advocating for LGBTQ youth in schools, foster care, juvenile justice settings, and the mental health system since 1993. The Project provides direct, free legal information to youth, legal advocates, and activists through a toll-free line; advocates for policies that protect and support LGBTQ youth in these different arenas; and litigates cases that are creating new legal protections for youth in schools, foster care, juvenile justice, and other settings.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT:**

**Jody Marksamer, Staff Attorney**

415.392.6257 x308

[jmarksamer@nclrights.org](mailto:jmarksamer@nclrights.org)

Toll-free Legal Helpline: 1.800.528.6257

**National Center for Lesbian Rights**

870 Market Street, Suite 370

San Francisco, CA 94102

[info@nclrights.org](mailto:info@nclrights.org)

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