

# Gender Performance Art as a Tool in Youth Asset Development

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August 2007

Wingspan's Sexual Violence Prevention Curriculum for sexual minority youth is based on the Assets Framework Model.<sup>1</sup> The Assets Framework Model works seamlessly within the public health approach to sexual violence prevention and has been shown to reduce high risk behaviors in youth. Wingspan's program implements a series of seven workshops with the goal of identifying and building assets among youth as a tool for primary sexual violence prevention. Uniquely, our program strives to build developmental assets using a culturally competent approach that recognizes lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning (LGBTQ) youth experience.

For instance, LGBTQ-identified youth face loss of family and community support at an alarming rate. Because an important asset in a young person's life is family support, we look at alternative definitions of family. In our workshop entitled, "We Are Family," we encourage youth to consider how to create families of choice and expand on traditional notions of family. In this workshop, we are able to address bystander responsibility and positive peer influence. Youth dialogue ideas for how they can look out for their own "family."

One portion of the curriculum lets youth explore cultural and personal conceptions of gender identity through gender performance, or "drag shows." These Creative Expression Activities are one strategy for addressing a wide range of the developmental assets that lower risk for sexual violence among youth.

Gender performance has been done in diverse cultures for most of recorded history. In the twentieth century, transgender activists (a more modern term used to describe people who identified as drag queens and kings at the time) are widely credited with launching the modern "gay rights" movement. The seminal New York City Stonewall Riots of 1969 would never have thrust LGBT oppression into the spotlight were it not for the brave determination of gender non-traditionalists like Sylvia Rivera. While her gender-traditional gay male contemporaries may have remained content to sit by and continue to endure the widespread police harassment of the late 1960's, Rivera decided enough was enough and stood up to her oppressors on that fateful June night, signaling to the rest of the world that sexual minorities would no longer accept anything less than full respect and equality.

Though Rivera would be defined as transgendered but not necessarily a drag queen by modern definitions, her strength and determination derived from the same socio-political milieu of the mid-twentieth century United States. Though she lived full time as a woman and did not dress as a woman to entertain audiences, Sylvia Rivera and her gender-bending contemporaries are inherently linked by the ways in which they found empowerment through subverting traditional gender roles and appearances.

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<sup>1</sup> Fisher, D., Imm, P., Chinman, M., & Wandersman, A. (2006). *Getting to outcomes with developmental assets: Ten steps to measuring success in youth programs and communities*. Minneapolis, MN: Search Institute.

For LGBTQ youth, especially those who do not fit comfortably into traditional gender roles, establishing a positive individual and cultural identity can be challenging. Wingspan's Sexual Violence Prevention Curriculum encourages creative exploration of identity through gender performance. The process of working together with other youth and supportive adults integrates each of the eight areas of external and internal asset development:

### **SUPPORT**

- caring neighborhood/community – by participating in the planning and implementation of a drag show, youth feel a part of a larger LGBTQ community
- community values youth – the investments in the drag shows made by the larger LGBTQ community demonstrates the importance of youth to that community

### **EMPOWERMENT**

- youth given useful roles – even for those youth who do not feel comfortable performing in front of an audience, there are always important and necessary roles for all youth in the planning and implementation of a show
- youth volunteer in the community – youth participate in the drag show on a voluntary basis

### **BOUNDARIES AND EXPECTATIONS**

- adult role models – youth work in partnership with adult staff and experienced drag performer volunteers
- positive peer influence – more experienced youth drag performers take less experienced performers under their wings and provide mentorship and support
- high expectations of youth – creating new drag shows from the ground up takes significant time and commitment on the part of the youth who create them

### **CONSTRUCTIVE USE OF TIME**

- creative and cultural activities – from selecting music to choreographing dance routines, to creating costumes and sets, creativity flows during the process
- youth programs – while adults provide guidance and support, drag performances are youth-created and youth-led

### **COMMITMENT TO LEARNING**

- achieving motivation – youth participants feed each others' desire to put on an entertaining and exciting show

### **POSITIVE VALUES**

- equality and social justice – taking inspiration from historical intersections between drag performers and LGBT rights struggles, youth participants plan shows that address these same themes
- integrity – youth participants are encouraged to discover their authentic selves through the process of developing original and grandiose characters
- responsibility – youth take on all aspects of producing the drag shows, from writing to staging to performing

## **SOCIAL SKILLS**

- planning and decision making – drag shows do not just come together overnight; youth spend significant time and energy working out even the most minute details
- interpersonal skills – working as a team is integral to putting on a successful show
- cultural competence – youth must understand and appreciate not only drag culture, but the cultures of those performers they impersonate and cultures of origin of the songs they perform

## **POSITIVE IDENTITY**

- personal power – many youth find that holding an audience mesmerized with their performances is one of the most empowering experiences of their young lives
- self-esteem – performing in front of an appreciative audience can do wonders for developing a youth's positive sense of self
- sense of purpose – knowing that they are part of a larger effort to entertain and inform can be a major motivating factor for young people
- positive view of personal future – achieving a successful drag performance helps youth believe that anything is possible

The Wingspan Anti-Violence Project is proud to be a part of implementing a program that engages youth in creative processes and dialogues that inspire them. As a component to our workshop series, the creative activity of drag performance is a natural element of asset-based youth development programs for sexual minority youth.