

November 17, 2009

Responding to the suicides of two more gay youths — letter to a community.

Two young men — college students who are part of the GLBT community — committed suicide very recently in a community I'm connected to. This is my response to the people they left behind and to the helpers who are now going to deal with this. It is based on what I have come to understand since our son Bill killed himself in 1995.

One of the hard parts right now when you want to support is just being there, just sitting with people in pain and in your own pain. As much as you want to help it's really important to understand at a deep level that you can't fix this. These children are dead — their lives were taken by their own hands, and you will never be able to make sense of this even if on some level you understand why. I am not at all saying you can't help. Showing up and being present now and for the long haul can help more than you may ever know.

If possible, don't let people ask family and loved ones to make decisions about giving things away as remembrances when it's so close to the loss. That happened to us, and we said yes to things that belonged to Bill in the first numb days, and later we regretted that decision. Even letting well meaning friends clean his room and wash his clothing and bedding later seemed too rushed, like an attempt to wash away him and the things he held and touched.

Be careful about making assumptions.

If you are bringing in or referring to counselors or other support people, be careful that they are educated allies to the LGBT community. If they are not, they can make things worse for people who are grieving. I think that being true allies is more important than how much they are educated about the specifics of LGBT suicide especially if their education is formal and focused on information about things like statistics and risk factors because that kind of distant processing stops us from dealing with the loss of a human being who we were close to.

I just saw on the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP) website that this Saturday is the 11th Annual National Survivors of Suicide Day. (See <http://www.afsp.org/survivorconference>) And there is a definite place for sharing survivor stories. Trevor Project has a whole campaign about it with "I'm Glad I Failed" (see <http://www.thetrevorproject.org/ImGladIFailed/>).

It's important to make sure people know you can survive, but not to the point of pushing away the reality of the hole torn in the place where people who commit suicide were in our lives. Focusing on survivors when it is this close to the death of someone who committed suicide can feel like ignoring, avoiding, disrespecting the people who just didn't survive — feeling like there is no place for hard loss and grief.

One thing I would be careful about is if/how you talk about suicide prevention, particularly when it is LGBT youths who have died. Much of the talk about prevention is about identifying depression or other mental illness and medicating or hospitalizing to stabilize the person — ignoring the fact that kids like our son Bill choose suicide because they have lost hope of a world changing so that they can live whole and good lives. I'm not at all ignoring that there can be many things going on in a youth's life (including biochemical depression, etc. that may need attention and intervention), but when it comes to preventing suicide of LGBTQ youth, we are dealing with situation-based depression and traumatic stress. Changing this world we all live in is real prevention.

Please take good care of yourselves and each other and let me know what I can do to help.

Love to you all,
Gabi Clayton, Olympia, WA
gabi@gabiclayton.com
<http://www.gabiclayton.com>