

COLUMBIA SPECTATOR ARCHIVE

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Campus Queer Groups Aid Gay Homeless

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Imagine that you're 18 again and instead of calculating your chance of acceptance to Columbia, you are forced to contemplate the dismal odds of getting a bed for the night. This is the reality for the 7,000 homeless queer youth in New York City fighting for one of two dozen beds set aside for them.

Twelve of those beds are at the Ali Forney Center, a Harlem shelter that, according to its Web site, is "committed to providing [queer homeless youth] with safe, dignified, nurturing environments where their needs can be met, and where they can begin to put their lives back together."

Now, members of Q—a Columbia lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender group—have decided to work with AFC as it expands to provide 48 slots, 18 of which will be emergency beds for up to six months and 24 of which will be transitional beds, allowing teens to stay for up to two years.

"Every couple of months, one of our kids would get killed on the streets," said Carl Siciliano, the executive director and founder of the AFC, who has been working with homeless teens in NYC for 10 years. He was a personal friend of Forney's and founded the center in his memory in 2002. While working in a drop-in center in Times Square, he said he noticed that living on the street can be considerably

worse for queer kids.

"When we suggested the idea to the group, people were pretty enthusiastic about it," Jessie Thisell, BC '06 and Q's treasurer, said of Q's decision to get involved with the center.

Student groups can get involved with the cause of queer homelessness in a variety of ways, such as starting an advocacy group or taking part in lobbying day on April 6th, but the Q students decided to focus on fundraising. Q members have planned for a food and clothing drive at the end of the year. Bins in the lobbies will be used to collect items the center always needs, such as canned goods, toiletries, cleaning supplies and office supplies, twin sheet sets, and towels. In addition, the center is looking for donated items that make the apartments seem "less like shelters and more like a home," including posters, magazines, and rugs, Thisell said.

The queer prom, an annual dance sponsored by Q, has traditionally been free, but this year ticket proceeds could go to the AFC, Thisell said. The prom will take place in Altschul Atrium on the last day of classes in May.

The center's namesake, Ali Forney, was a gay teen who prostituted himself, became addicted to drugs, and tested HIV positive before being shot to death in 1997. Forney was rejected by his family after coming out to them and was forced to live on the streets. According to the AFC, rejection by their

families is a fact of life for up to 25 percent of gay teens.

"Nobody was paying attention to the fact that this was happening to them," Siciliano said. Though at least 40 percent of homeless youth are gay, according to Siciliano, the funding and focus of existing shelters does not reflect that. The Ali Forney Center is one of a few shelters specifically for queer youth in the entire country.

In the two years since its opening, the Ali Forney Center, which "started in the basement of a church with no money" has become one of the largest gay youth organizations in the country, with 110 youth on the waiting list for a bed. "We are actually a very comprehensive program now," Siciliano said.

The AFC currently owns two apartments, both located in neighborhoods it says are safe for queer youth. One is in Harlem, below 125th Street on Broadway. When the center expands to three more apartments, they'll need people to decorate and help paint.

Opportunities for volunteering with the center, located at 3151 Broadway, Suite 2C, are limited. The shelter is only open from 8 p.m. to 8 a.m., and volunteers must be over 25. More conventional methods of volunteering will be available when the Ali Forney Day Center opens in Chelsea, said Siciliano. The Day Center conceivably will be open during the day and offer services like psychiatry, support groups, and HIV testing.