



OutCenter



Serving the LGBT Community in Southwest Michigan

OUT & abOUT

Newsletter

April 2013

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Michigan Department of Civil Rights Comes to Southwest Michigan

Dear Friend of the OutCenter,

Once again, staff and Board have been incredibly busy over the last month on a number of levels. One very interesting opportunity included being invited to attend and participate in the 50th anniversary "listening tour" of the Michigan Department of Civil Rights. Fellow OutCenter Board Member, Tracy Cleveland-Jennings and I attended the event at Lake Michigan College on April 17th.



Also in attendance were several local law enforcement agencies, members of the health department, local faith leaders and educators, county commissioners, members of the Civil Rights Commission, along with representatives from Michigan Works and the Fair Housing Center of South West Michigan.

The question that kicked off the dialogue at the luncheon: What should be a priority of the Michigan Department of Civil Rights over the next ten years?

The OutCenter's response: The inclusion of sexual orientation and gender identity in the State's Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act--the Act which defines civil rights and prohibits discriminatory practices, policies and customs in the exercise of those rights based upon religion, race, color, national origin, age, sex, height, weight, familial status, or marital status.

The unfortunate reality is that everyday LGBT discrimination continues to occur in Michigan and agencies like the Michigan Department of Civil Rights (MDCR) are very limited in their ability to fully investigate LGBT discrimination, since we are NOT included in the state law. At this meeting, in response to our statement to all in attendance, the MDCR acknowledges this has been a problem since the 1970's, when they first advocated for full LGBT inclusion. However, they are doubtful the State Legislature will act in the near future.

Nevertheless, we encouraged the MDCR to recommit to making this a priority, citing the need for Michigan to become a state that truly supports equal rights for all, and citing the opportunity to leverage the extraordinary momentum for LGBT rights that is building in Michigan and across the country.

On a closing note, I have to say how honored I feel to be able to attend these meetings and speak out on behalf of the people the OutCenter serves and the mission of this great organization.

I hope you enjoy reading the rest of this newsletter and will consider making a donation today in support of the work the OutCenter is doing.

Individual Donations Now More Important Than Ever

[Donate](#)

Help the OutCenter become more sustainable today!

Your donation will help the OutCenter serve the LGBT community and its allies in Southwest Michigan.

All amounts count!
Please donate today!

Quick Links

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OutCenter on Facebook:



Next ALIVE Youth

Group Meeting:

Saturday, May 18
2-4 PM
The Phoenix
124 Water Street
Benton Harbor, MI

ALIVE Youth on Facebook!



LGBT Potluck at the OutCenter!

Come with a dish, meet and hang out with your peers, hear news of the OutCenter's work in 2013, and share your ideas with Mary Jo Schnell and Brian Savage.

Sunday, May 19
5:30 PM
The OutCenter
132 Water Street
Benton Harbor, MI

info@outcenter.org
269.925.8330

Foundation Support



West Shore Aware



Sincerely,

Brian Savage
Board Chair

Post Script: Other MDCR priorities discussed include:

- Broadening the MDCR reach and partnerships,
- Adopting fair housing recommendations,
- Implementing recent suggestions to improve working and living conditions for migrant workers, and
- Creating a safe environment for reporting discrimination.



ALIVE Youth Group Met with College GSA, Reported on by Student Journalists

The OutCenter is pleased to introduce this new column. MacKenzie Carlock and Claire Postelli are student journalists who will

cover stories of interest and provide insights on LGBTQ-related matters from the perspective of youth in Southwest Michigan. This is their first contribution to this newsletter, reporting on April's ALIVE Youth Group meeting.

On April 13, the ALIVE Youth Group met at The Phoenix on Water Street. ALIVE Youth Group is sponsored and wholly supported by the OutCenter as the larger community's Gay Straight Alliance (GSA). A GSA is a group typically formed on high school and college campuses with the goal of creating and fostering a sense of belonging and safety for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students.

At this ALIVE Youth Group meeting, youth in attendance had an opportunity to meet with college students who are members of All4One, the "unofficially official" Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) at Andrews University.

It was good to hear these LGBTQ and allied college students not only talk about going from high school to college, but also about their work to establish All4One and how important it was to find each other and come together as a GSA. Andrews University is the flagship educational institution of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. These student journalists were impressed and came away with a sense of hope. After all, if these students have support and unity, maybe other LGBTQ community members and their allies in Southwest Michigan can achieve similar support and a sense of belonging.

An important insight mentioned by All4One members as a step in their process was helping others "put a face to gay." In such tight knit places like Berrien County, it is easy to fear the idea of gay people when you are not open to or know a gay person. However, once you know someone personally--a niece, a nephew, a son or daughter, an aunt or uncle, a friend--it's hard to see them as anything but themselves. This was just one of the many inspirational ideas discussed at the meeting.

All4One inspires all of us to step up and make a difference in the face of adversity. As long as students can come together in support of each other, show a desire to make positive change, administrators will try and meet their needs. However, this desire must be shown just like it was at Andrews University. If we work as one, we can try and get functioning GSAs in schools around Berrien County.

The LGBTQ Youth need to feel safe in their schools and have an outlet where they can be themselves. Everyone deserves to talk to people they trust and to feel understood. Saint Joseph High School is the only high school around the area with a GSA as of now. It's one of the OutCenter's goals to change this.

If you want to join and get involved, the door is open! The next ALIVE Youth Group meeting is Saturday, May 18, 2-4 PM at The Phoenix on Water Street. Come out in support of this community's GSA!

OutCenter at Berrien RESA

The OutCenter had the opportunity to share information about youth related programs and resources to all middle and high school counselors in Berrien County on Friday April 19th.

Joyce Miller, Homeless Education/Health Consultant for Berrien RESA,

invited the OutCenter to the Counselor Academy, which was held at the Mendel Center on the Lake Michigan College campus.

Margo Runkle, who recently joined the OutCenter board, served as the organization's ambassador at this gathering. She began by sharing that she grew up in Edwardsburg in Cass County, adding how important it would have been to her if she had a counselor who she felt she could confide in--and what it was like not to have that opportunity.

Margo came quickly to the core point: LGBT students and their allies need to know they belong, that school can be a safe place for them, and that they deserve to have access to a supportive and understanding adult professional who can help them.



Segueing to the OutCenter's role, Margo emphasized to the counselors that this organization is a resource to them and to the LGBTQ youth of Berrien County (and allies).

She also talked about the fact that although the legal and cultural landscape for LGBTQ rights is undergoing dramatic changes across the country and many terrific milestones have been achieved, Southwest Michigan is still a very conservative area, adding that this is even more reason for the OutCenter to be here and be a resource and benefit to young people and their allies across the County.

The response from the audience was very positive. Many requested that the flyer for the ALIVE youth group available on our website and also requested cards that they could have available for students to take and use. Interest was also expressed for an OutCenter presence in south Berrien County to reach those students in New Buffalo, Buchanan, and River Valley.

Post Script: The OutCenter has already begun to receive additional requests for flyers, links to the [ALIVE Youth Facebook page](#), and information about the OutCenter and PFLAG of Berrien County. There is an opportunity, too, to expand to a location in South County. More information on this will be forthcoming.

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