

Supporting LGBTQ Survivors: Interview with Holly Reese



Pride month may have passed but supporting LGBTQ victim-survivors is a year-round initiative. LGBTQ victim-survivors face unique challenges in their healing journey. In an enlightening interview, Holly Reese, the Senior Director of Programming at The Center, a service center for the LGTBQIA+ community in Southern Nevada, shares her own experience as a member of the LGBTQ community and advocate.

Holly's journey in advocacy in Las Vegas began after a string of traumatic events connected her with local advocates who had brought her into community support spaces. Emerging from a home where she experienced terrible violence, and coping with the tragic death of her daughter right before a recession where she was in

between careers, Holly undertook a deep process of grieving and healing. After years of individual and group therapy, Holly had been introduced to a number of community events, including Take Back the Night, where she spoke publically about her trauma for the first time. She looks back on this experience as life-changing. Holly's incredible strength, ability to alchemize her pain into power, and critical support systems empowered her as she delved deeper into the community and found how uplifting building relationships can be.

When Holly joined The Center, it had been part of Gender Justice of Nevada. The more involved with gender justice Holly became, the more she realized there were significant gaps in resources available for LGBTQ people. "There wasn't a single bed that I could place anybody in or a group or, I mean, there was just nothing in the city," Holly recounted. This void highlighted the systemic neglect of LGBTQ survivors. Instead of confronting service providers with accusations of exclusion, Holly chose to build relationships.

"I decided that what we needed to do was make relationships," she explained. She reached out to executive directors and other stakeholders in the anti-violence community, emphasizing the importance of inclusivity. Her approach paid off when she joined the steering committee for the Victims Assistance Academy of Nevada (VAAN). Although the initial focus was on women as victims and men as perpetrators, Holly's involvement brought attention to the needs of queer survivors.

Addressing the Need for Inclusive Programming and Advocacy

Understanding the dire need for specialized training, Holly developed a curriculum to train advocates in supporting LGBTQ survivors and other underserved populations. "I ended up getting this training program together and getting it credentialed, and it's the only nationally credentialed program in the country that focuses on LGBTQ people in underserved

populations,” Holly stated. This initiative, called the Center Advocacy Network, is credentialed by the National Organization for Victim Assistance (NOVA) and has trained and certified over 300 advocates in Las Vegas, significantly improving the availability of support services for LGBTQ survivors.

The challenges faced by LGBTQ victim-survivors are multifaceted. Holly explains that if advocates want to better support LGBTQ victim-survivors, advocates must navigate issues such as pronoun usage, understanding diverse identities, and combating homophobia and transphobia. Creating a truly inclusive culture requires commitment at all levels of an organization. Holly emphasizes that it is not enough to train frontline staff; inclusivity must be embedded in the organizational culture. “You've got to be able to create a culture that it's unacceptable to not be inclusive,” she stressed.

“On one hand, it's complicated and on the other hand, it's simple because the answer is we treat everybody the same way. The answer is we do not allow bullying or violence in our organizations at any level. If you can extend that out to all humans, it's simple. But it's not because people don't know the language. We live in a divisive country and people are scared to ask questions and people feel defensive. So it's complicated and at the end of the day, I think the solution is relationships because when we know each other as human beings, then we can overcome all of these things because nobody stays in this business for any length of time unless they really care.”

Barriers Within the LGBTQ Community

Holly points out that many barriers to support also exist within the LGBTQ community. Internally, there is often a reluctance to discuss intimate partner violence (IPV) due to fears of judgment and the lack of models for healthy queer relationships. “Inside the community, this is a conversation that we just don't have,” Holly noted. “We understand the model of how to date, how to how to get married, how to have children, how to get divorced, how to do custody. We have all of this modeled so it's all hetero-normative. We don't have queer relationships modeled for us and we don't really know what they're supposed to look like or what we want them to look like.”

She goes on to say, “We also don't have conversations about what consent look like. What is healthy about our culture and what's unhealthy. Our culture was born in bars, right? It's born with substance abuse. It's born surrounded by suicide. It's born from being victims, because we're vulnerable and predators prey on vulnerable populations, and most of us have been violated and are victims of trauma. So it's all of this internalized individual trauma that we have to overcome first and then to be able to have the conversations with each other.”

The Power of Community

Ultimately, Holly believes that building relationships is key to overcoming these internal and external challenges. When people know each other as humans, they are more likely to support one another, reduce stigma, and work towards a common goal. This relational approach fosters understanding and empathy, crucial elements in creating effective support systems for LGBTQ survivors.



Holly Reese's work exemplifies the importance of inclusive and informed advocacy for LGBTQ survivors of sexual and domestic violence. By building relationships, developing specialized training programs, and addressing both internal and external barriers, advocates can create a more supportive environment for all survivors. As Holly aptly puts it, "Together we can," underscoring the collective effort needed to drive meaningful change.

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