

2011

Coming Out for Change Article

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Rhode Island's Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Community Newsmagazine www.optionsri.org

NOVEMBER 2011

“We Do This Every Year”

Will there ever come a year when the transgender community does not have to hold a Day of Remembrance?

Kim Stowell

In February, a transgender woman named Tyra Trent was found dead in a vacant Baltimore home. Reports indicate the victim died of asphyxiation or strangulation.

Friends described 25-year-old Tyra as bright, loving and motivated. “She loved people, loved animals, loved to talk to anybody,” said Sandy Rawls, a close friend to Trent and the director of a transgender outreach group. Rawls, who was helping Trent pursue a GED, believes she was killed as a result of her appearance. Her family said

she was constantly tormented because of the way she looked.

Police have no suspects in this case.

In March, Arkansas police found the body of 25-year-old Marcel Cameo Tye along a stretch of Highway 334, with a gunshot wound to the head and evidence of having been dragged some 300 feet under a car.

Tye was openly transgender, according to a friend, and was most likely approached by someone who was looking for sex. “And

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13th Annual Transgender Day of Remembrance

November 20, 2011



Transgender Day of Remembrance is a national day of mourning for transgender people who have been killed because of their gender identity or expression.

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A Simple Message for Hope

It Gets Better at URI: Coming Out for Change

Sara MacSorley

It all started with an idea Christina, a member of the University of Rhode Island LBTQ Women's Group, learned about the It Gets Better Project (www.itgetsbetter.org), a worldwide movement to show LGBT youth that life does in fact get better The project collects stories of LGBT people who are living openly and allies who want to be a visible source of support to young people The idea is to inspire youth to live comfortably and openly and to show that they, too, can achieve success and happiness

Christina thought the Women's Group could produce a video to show support at

URI The group agreed and figured they would film on their cell phones and edit using free software on one of their laptops Little did they know what a large and powerful project they were starting

The Women's Group raised over \$10,000 for the project Instead of filming on cell phones they were able to hire an award-winning videographer Colorful flyers asking students, faculty and staff to participate in video interviews went out around campus and the response was staggering More than 85 people participated in filming, resulting in over twelve hours of video

footage

The film *It Gets Better* made its debut at URI on October 5 to an audience of over 900 people President David Dooley spoke in his welcome about how proud he was to support the project and to work at an institution where "hope" was on its seal The message of hope resounded throughout the event

The premiere-goers watched in silence as professors whose classes they had taken, students they recognized from around campus, and staff members who helped them navi-

gate college life smoothly talk about their experiences. Some were themselves LGBT community members telling stories of perseverance. Others were allies telling stories of their LGBT family members and friends. Their stories were emotional, touching, and inspiring. They all had the same positive message: no matter what you are going through now, it gets better and there are people here at URI who support you.

Alycia Mosley Austin, Director of Graduate Recruitment and Diversity Initiatives, participated because "she wanted to be a face of someone students could go to, someone who would be supportive, listen, and understand. There is a whole group of people here for you [at URI]."

It is important for everyone to have role models. This film allows LGBT students, staff, and faculty to see people like them

who have faced similar issues. They can see real examples of people they may know who are successful while being open about their identity and/or sexuality. They can see how it gets better and how they too can be loved and supported by just being who they are.

Jennifer Specker says that she has seen URI "gradually embracing diversity of sexual orientation and gender identity" in her 25-plus years there as a Professor of Oceanography. "It's a whole new world," she says. Cathy Marcotte, class of 1982, also

says things are different today, "not completely where they will be yet, but much, much further along the right path because of the making and showing of *It Gets Better*."

The students in the Women's Group did a phenomenal job turning Christina's idea into reality and it says a lot for the positive support on campus. Joseph Santiago, Coordinator of the URI GLBT Center, agrees. "I believe that these wom-

en have become bridges that will support the weight that future students carry with them as they find themselves on the same road," he says.

There was a real sense of community and pride at the premiere. Pride in being LGBT, and pride in being a part of the URI community. Jess Raffaele, the representative for the LGBTIQ2 Alumni Chapter, said, "I was really proud it happened at my school as an alumna and as a staff member." Jody Lisberger, Director of Women's Studies, was "proud that URI would put all their energy and efforts into making and showing this film. It shows how open communication is really important."

Having gotten involved with it myself, this writer knows personally that the video had an impact. The morning after the premiere, I woke up to an email from a former student. She said that seeing my story made her feel that life was okay and it helped her accept who she is. She wanted to thank me for being an inspiration. Reading those few sentences brought tears to my eyes. At that moment, I realized that I was now one of many visible supporters on campus, and that this video would have a large and lasting impact for the URI community.

For questions about the URI LBTQ Women's Group or to order a DVD of the film for only \$7 plus shipping, please contact co-advisor Holly J. Nichols at hjnichols@uri.edu.

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