

Support for gays in foster settings

New group trains families, agencies

Saturday, January 30, 2010

By Sara Foss (Contact)

Gazette Reporter

Text Size: A | A | A

SCHENECTADY – Fred Elia grew up in the foster care system.

When his mother died when he was 2, Elia was sent to live in a foster family in Schenectady – one that was both large and loving.

“I grew up with a lot of support,” said Elia, 52, who still lives in Schenectady. “The stars just kind of aligned.” When he left home for college, “there was a whole caravan of people to take me,” he recalled. Not everyone is as fortunate.

Last year Elia created a new statewide nonprofit organization called A Thousand Moms.

It has two main functions: supporting gay and lesbian youth in foster and adoptive care, and providing training in gay and lesbian issues to adoptive and foster families and the agencies that serve them. Another goal is creating a network of people who can serve as mentors and tutors for these youths.

Many agencies, said Elia, who is gay, do not know how to deal with youths who are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender, or simply questioning their sexuality. Foster and adoptive families sometimes disapprove, he said, and discourage LGBT foster children from expressing themselves.

“A Thousand Moms is about communities helping to give kids what they need,” Elia said.

The group's motto: "Because some of us may need more than just one mom (or dad)."

LGBT youth comprise about 30 percent of the youth in foster care, compared to 10 percent to 15 percent of youth in the general population, according to Carol VanValkenburgh, who sits on the A Thousand Moms board.

"Kids who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered or questioning their sexuality are over-represented in the child care system," said VanValkenburgh. She recruits foster families for the state Office of Children & Family Services and served as a foster parent for 17 years. "There's a need for services for these kids, and a need for public awareness."

She said it's unclear why the percentage of gay and lesbian kids in foster care is so much higher than in the population at large.

Help for boy

Elia said he began thinking more about the need to provide extra support for LGBT youth after receiving a call about a 12-year-old boy who was "dressing in girls' clothes and playing with flowers." The boy was living in a residential setting at a private foster care agency in western New York, and "they didn't know how to handle it."

Elia said he asked the caller whether she knew any gay people who could "talk to this kid. I told her to go to the gay community center." A couple months later, Elia checked on the boy and learned that he was taking apart and remaking clothing. Eventually, he procured a sewing machine for the youth. "We figured out how to help this kid in a creative way," Elia said. "But at the end of the day, something should happen. I decided that I could do something."

More recently, Elia received a letter from a caseworker about a 16-year-old boy in another part of the state who was rejected by his adoptive

family when he told them he was gay. “Things seemed to be going pretty well overall,” the caseworker wrote. “There was a bond and connection between the child and adoptive family until the child hit puberty and began to question his sexual identity. The child is gay and his adoptive family does not and will not accept that. Therefore, after five years of not being in the system, the child was admitted to a psychiatric unit after running away and then attempting and threatening suicide. ... Please give me some feedback to what I find an injustice being done to this child. The adoptive family are really nice people, as long as you are straight. However, they are rural farmers who have no desire to learn more or accept any of this.”

Elia said “What I’ve learned is that these situations come up all the time.”

VanValkenburgh, who is a recruitment specialist at the University at Albany’s Professional Development Program, said that when she recruits foster parents she looks for people who are going to be open-minded and supportive. “I don’t want kids who have already been traumatized in their own home to have another burden.”

Fledgling group

A Thousand Moms is still a new organization. So far, the group has hosted two statewide conference calls, with the goal of building a network of support for LGBT youth. A third call is scheduled for late February. Each call addresses a specific theme; January’s theme was “Coming Out: The Words That Change Everything – Or Should They?” Elia said the calls bring together foster and adoptive parents, as well as agency staff.

“The real purpose of the calls is having a network that can pull together,” Elia said.

Elia lives with his longtime partner. He owns Hearthstone Homes, a rural residential real-estate development company.

But in some ways, he never really left the foster care system.

In 1981, he earned a master's degree from Columbia University School of Social Work and eventually went to work for the New York State Department of Social Services, where, among other things, he manned the statewide child abuse hot line and prepared official reports of child abuse/maltreatment. This led to a job as a senior education specialist at the Nelson A. Rockefeller College of Public Affairs and Policy in Albany, where he developed educational programming about services for abused and neglected children.

Since 2006, Elia has worked as a consultant and trainer for public and private child welfare organizations throughout New York, with a focus on foster care and adoption. He also serves as co-chair of the Capital Region Adoption and Foster Care Consortium, which recruits foster parents.

“There are never enough foster parents,” Elia said.

He also created and maintains the Foster Care Garden on his five-acre property, which is open to visitors, particularly people who didn't have the positive foster care experience he had.

“It's about compassion, and giving people a safe space,” Elia said.