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Youth theater troupe gets help from Social Innovation Forum

by Ethan Jacobs
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Evelyn Francis (left), director of education for True Colors Out Youth Theater, helps youth in the theater troupe write, stage and perform theater pieces focussing on the experiences of LGBT youth. Photo: Social Innovation Forum.

Evelyn Francis, director of education for True Colors Out Youth Theater, has big plans. Over the next two years she hopes to double the capacity of the LGBT youth theater troupe, both in terms of the number of participants and the number of performances True Colors puts on each year. Francis hopes that True Colors' partnership with the Social Innovation Forum, which works with non-profits to connect them with new sources of funding, will help the troupe accomplish that goal.

On March 25 the Social Innovation Forum held a breakfast at Wainwright Bank's office in Boston's financial district to showcase True Colors' work. Among the 30 or so attendees were representatives from a handful of foundations, and current donors and supporters of the troupe's work, including a representative of the Massachusetts Cultural Council. During the breakfast Francis described the program's work and the

positive impact it has on the lives of both the youth participants and the audiences who see their performances.

Founded in 1994, the troupe works with two groups of 10-12 youth each year, helping them write, stage and perform an original play about the issues they face as LGBT young people, then sends them on a tour of New England to perform their show. True Colors performs for about 2500 people per year.

Francis emphasized the transformative impact the program has had on participants. She said one member of the troupe named Kathleen wanted to talk about the experience she had when she started dating another girl at her all-girls Catholic high school. Francis said Kathleen's girlfriend posted a picture of the two of them on her MySpace page, and soon after a group of girls at school approached Kathleen, told her they had seen the picture, and then slammed her head against a locker and pushed her down a flight of stairs. The bullying continued, and Francis said when Kathleen confided in a school counselor she was given little support and told she should not have let anyone know she was gay. The situation prompted Kathleen to drop out of school.

"She performed this piece for 1200 students, administrators, counselors, and she felt so empowered because she told her story and they listened," said Francis. She said the show had an equally powerful effect on at least one attendee, who spoke with Kathleen after the performance and said it helped her understand the struggles that her lesbian sister was experiencing.

Francis explained that many of the youth taking part in True Colors are at high risk for a variety of health and safety problems. More than a third of participants have been at one point or are currently homeless, more than half have attempted suicide, and more than half either have had or currently have a substance abuse problem.

Valerie Bassett, director of policy and research for the Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts Foundation, gave a broader overview on the public health problems facing LGBT youth and the need to fund programs that work to address those problems. Drawing from a variety of state and national surveys, she explained that anti-gay

harassment and lack of support puts LGBT youth at greater risk to become homeless, to be abused, to develop substance abuse problems and to attempt suicide. She said public funding to deal with LGBT issues, both at the local and national level, is intermittent and undependable. In terms of private funding she referenced a study by Funders for Lesbian and Gay Issues showing that less than 0.1 percent of total funding by U.S. foundations goes to LGBT causes, and half of that funding goes to large advocacy organizations, rather than smaller non-profits like True Colors.

Following the presentations Francis answered questions from the audience and chatted with attendees. She told *Bay Windows* that the breakfast is only one part of the support True Colors is getting from the Social Innovation Forum. The troupe is one of six non-profits the forum is working with this year, and on April 30 all six will present their programs to foundation representatives and other potential funders at the Social Innovation Forum's fifth annual venture forum at the MIT Faculty Club. The goal of the event is to showcase innovative Boston-area non-profits and connect them to private and public sources of funding.

Francis said the Social Innovation Forum is also helping True Colors create materials to present to potential funders outlining their work.

"We're working on a prospectus, a really concise description of the social problem and how True Colors is working to solve the problem," said Francis. She said the forum will also help True Colors develop a Power Point presentation about the troupe that Francis can present to other potential funders interested in learning about True Colors.

Over the course of this year, the Social Innovation Forum will also help True Colors develop relationships with those potential funders. Francis said in the past she has invited representatives from foundations to view True Colors' performances, but many of those invitations failed to garner a response. She said she believes the Social Innovation Forum will help them do a better job of attracting the attention of those foundations through events like the breakfast.

"This was the perfect venue for us to communicate who we are in a room full of people who want to hear about who we are," said Francis.



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