

## True Colors gives voice to silenced queer youth

The Theater Offensive's 12-year-old program, overcomes adversity of cutbacks, continues to provide a home for GLBT teens

by William Henderson  
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Patricia Rojas may have an in-your-face style - baggy jeans that hide her waist, facial piercings, a tendency to wear backward-facing ball caps - but it was only after joining True Colors, a theater group comprised of queer youth, that she found her voice.

It's a voice that could have gone silenced. And for most of her young life, it was silenced, silenced by a mother who didn't want a gay daughter, silenced by a downward spiral fueled by alcohol, weed, pills, silenced by her own inability to reconcile her life with that of her friends and family.

But today, a few months of sobriety behind her and a newfound home within True Colors, Rojas is OK, if not better than OK, she said during a recent interview, crediting True Colors with saving her.

Similarly, Gilberto Teixeira, 18, found himself stuck. His family is Pentecostal, he said, and he was taught that even his thoughts were a sin, let alone the act of homosexuality itself.

"But when I came out to some friends, and was later outed accidentally to my family, I realized that there is hypocrisy in the church," he said. "Here [at True Colors], I'm allowed to be more open with myself, more comfortable with who I am."

True Colors emerged almost 12 years ago as a program funded by the Massachusetts Department of Education specifically for GLBT youth. The mission was simple - to give a voice to the queer youth experience as a means of identifying ways of decreasing homophobia in the schools. A round of budget cuts later, the program could have been stopped completely had it not already created a means of sustaining itself and developed a partnership with The Theater Offensive, according to Brenda Coto-Escalera, education director for Theater Offensive and True Colors' current artistic director.

Statistics show that queer youth are five times more likely to attempt suicide than their straight peers, and odds are they will have experienced some form of harassment as a result of their sexual orientation by the time they graduate high school, that is, if they don't drop out first, she said.

"And that was at the center of doing this - looking at how to decrease the risks and increase the safety of GLBT students in public schools," said Coto-Escalera. "But now we've broadened our goals. We're not only about giving our participants the skills they need to survive in school, but now we want them to thrive and make a difference."

She admits that the speed in which things are changing for the queer community - including the legalization of gay marriage in Massachusetts - has helped break down barriers that were around when she was a kid. She thinks what the True Colors troupe does is courageous and though she wishes she had had the chance to belong to something similar when she was younger, she doesn't know if she would have had the same courage to tell her story.

The current True Colors show revolves around the idea of silence, of the silencing of queer youth, and how these kids, the ones who live this silence on a daily basis, are taking back their voices and fighting to be heard.

Fifteen-year-old Jenny French says her silencing came at the hands of a teacher three years ago while she was attending Kennedy Middle School in Waltham. She and a male friend were "checking out another girl." When caught, she was punished; her male friend was not.

"I joined because I needed someplace to express myself," she said during a recent interview. "I've found a real family here and an outlet for telling my story."

It's having this outlet in place that brings together queer youth from around the state, said Coto-Escalera.

"It's a collective creation process," she said. "We start by having them write down what's important to them and then we work on how to tell stories about it. ['Silence'] developed from stories they told about moments in their lives when they felt silent or silenced. They are the ones who are going to shape our future, and it may sound trite but it's true. This is a moment

of incredible change for them. They have very important things to say and good ideas on how to create a better world."

Joining True Colors is easy. Performers must be between the ages of 14 and 22, committed to sharing their personal experiences as a queer youth, and must be willing to perform throughout the state and attend weekly rehearsals. Auditions are held at the start of each season, but interested performers are encouraged to apply year-round. •

*For more information, connect to [www.thetheateroffensive.org](http://www.thetheateroffensive.org).*