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## Wanted: affirming homes for GLBT foster kids

Initiative seeks gay-friendly foster parents for homeless teens

By JUAN CARLOS RODRIGUEZ  
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By the time he was 14, Michael Acosta was known among Miami Dade foster care agencies as a “runner.” He developed a pattern of breaking rules and running away from the homes and shelters he was placed in. Now 19 and out of the foster system, Acosta remembers the year he had been placed 20 times in different homes.

Like many gay lesbian or transgender teens, Acosta just didn’t fit in to the placements. His memories are bleary of couch hopping, avoiding police and being brought back into the foster system. Soon he was drawn to drugs and alcohol.

“I don’t think I felt much because I was always high or drunk,” Acosta remembers. “That’s how I coped with things.”

His first therapist, he remembers, told him that his problem was that he was gay, and recommended he find God.

Acosta’s situation is all too common for GLBT young people in foster care. Too often they are placed in homes or shelters where they feel they cannot express themselves freely. They are bullied and harassed, and instead of learning to deal with their sexuality, they are often told that being straight is the only road to a righteous life.

But Acosta, whose parents were both addicted to drugs and in and out of jail, stopped running when he met Amy Rolnick, a library administrator and self described “54 year old vanilla lesbian” and gay Miami Shores real estate agent Ronald Platt. Rolnick and Platt had just finished state certification to be foster parents in order to specifically help gay kids.

Rolnick became involved with helping gay foster runaways after helping one young teen who then led her to several others.

She began scouting out gay foster kids on the street, driving through neighborhoods where homeless teens would live. With Acosta acting as a guide, she was able to determine the scope of a problem that was not being addressed.

“I began seeing them all over the place,” Rolnick recalls. “They sleep in cars, get picked up for

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shoplifting – they’re everywhere.”

After meeting Acosta, Rolnick began a journey that took her from the streets around Biscayne Boulevard in Miami to meeting with national foster care organizations in Washington DC and New York to call for studies and initiatives to help gay foster kids. In Miami she organized a group of gay men and lesbians to become foster parents and foster gay kids.

“These are our kids,” Rolnick said. “Our community needs to step up for our kids.”

Rolnick’s own grassroots project became the model for a county-wide program that began this summer at Family Resource Center (FRC) one of seven foster care contractors in Miami Dade County.. The program recruits “gay-affirmative” parents who will act as role models and mentors.

“A lot of gay kids get bounced about a bit,” said Robert Boyack, director FRC’s GLBTQ Foster Care Program. “They have no stability.”

Finding supportive foster parents, Boyack said, makes a huge difference for these kids.

Boyack estimates that about 400 teens in the Miami-Dade foster care program identify as GLBT or questioning. The FRC program trains foster parents, and connects them with gay foster kids.

“We’re looking foster parents who are gay-affirmative,” Boyack said, “for someone who is willing to provide a safe home and become a positive role model.”

The FRC program is the first of its kind in Miami-Dade County. In Broward County, the National Youth Advocate Program (NYAP) provides similar services for gay kids. Katy Warner, the NYAP’s director, said for the past year the organization has been working with Sun Serve and Broward foster care provider Child Net to connect gay kids with appropriate foster parents.

Since meeting Acosta five years ago, Rolnick and Platt opened up their homes for Acosta to stay. For the first time in his life Acosta had a stable home.

“I think of our family like a gay adopted family,” Platt said.

Acosta now lives with Platt in Miami Shores, and he said he realizes how influential Rolnick and Platt have been when he looks back at his early years.

“No little kid should go through what I went through,” said Acosta.

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