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West and East Village, Chelsea, Soho, Noho, Little Italy, Chinatown and Lower East Side, Since 1933



Villager photo by J.B. Nicholas

Young adults relax and socialize in The Door's ground-floor space with a game of bingo.

Through The Door, finding a place to grow and learn

By Gabriel Zucker

"When I first came to New York, I didn't have a lot of sense of direction," said Brandon Butler, a 19-year-old student at Columbia, who goes by the name Paris. "I was in need of help."

As Butler tells it, he found that help at The Door, a comprehensive youth services center based in Soho. "The Door was a place for me to be myself, and an opportunity for me to help out other youth," he said.

The Door, founded in 1972, provides services in several areas, including adolescent healthcare, careers and education, mental health, creative arts and legal services. But for some of The Door's regulars, one of its biggest assets is the role it plays as a haven for gay and lesbian youth like Paris.

"Everyone accepts you here," concluded Paris with a smile.

"Safe space is always an issue for L.G.B.T.Q. kids," explained Karen Remy, The Door's director of mental health and personal development, who oversees much of the organization's L.G.B.T.Q. programming. And The Door is a substantial safe space, too; the center fills several floors of a large building on Broome St., between Sixth Ave. and Varick St., open to youth from 2 p.m. to 8 p.m., Monday through Friday. "I don't know how many square feet we are," laughed Remy.

Although it features a good deal of L.G.B.T.Q.-specific programming, The Door maintains an inclusive philosophy in its work.

"What's unique is the fact that our L.G.B.T.Q. services are integrated into the youth population at large," said Remy. Queer youth "participate in the gamut of things we do here. We're like a little microcosm of society."

"The Door's L.G.B.T.Q. programming is unique because it reaches so far beyond just that population of young people," said

Dianne Morales, The Door's executive director, in a statement. "While we have developed targeted programming for the L.G.B.T. population — like the Kiki Function and some of our workshops and peer groups — even our overall programming reflects the L.G.B.T.Q. youth we serve, just as it reflects our Latino, black, Asian, foster care, immigrant and court-involved members."

Still, The Door's specifically L.G.B.T.Q. programs are quite popular, bringing in 465 participants in the last 11 months. Many of the programs are forums dealing with L.G.B.T.Q.-related issues, including Love, Sweat and Tears, which discusses adolescent relationships; the Gay-Straight Alliance; and GenderWhere, which explores issues related to sexuality.

For Morales, the program that "most reflects our philosophy in working with the L.G.B.T.Q. community" is the Kiki Function. In association with a handful of other youth service providers, The Door holds mini-balls with competitive voguing, intended for gay youth who aren't old enough to attend balls throughout the city. But The Door's balls are unique.

"When we started having these mini-balls, we realized that they're very competitive and could be intimidating for young people who don't know how to dance or who've never seen this before," Morales explained. "We found a way to flip the system and turn these contests into a really positive experience for everyone involved. Now Kiki Functions include workshops on learning the basics and we've begun to nurture a group of young leaders in the community who go out to other organizations and help them run positive competitions."

Many of these L.G.B.T.Q. programs exist thanks to the work of youth who frequent The Door.

"It's youth-oriented programming — programs that young people at The Door ask for," said Remy. "In many cases they help to facilitate. We make them part of the planning."

Paris has taken the spirit of involvement to heart; just a year and a half after first coming to The Door, he is integral to much of the organization's L.G.B.T.Q. programming. He spoke with particular energy about his work on the Kiki Function.

"We teach them the basic elements of the ballroom scene, and how to have self-esteem," he said. "We let them know that, no matter who you are, as long as you try, you can always become better."

Paris was also an instrumental part of the planning for The Door's L.G.B.T.Q. prom last Friday — "The theme we are going for is 'A Night in Egypt,'" he explained — and the organization's elaborate Pride March float, which has won the Best Float prize two years in a row.

"When The Door started marching in the parade they started out just holding a banner," laughed Remy. This year, youth at The Door have choreographed their dance to Beyoncé's "Single Ladies," she said, adding that "we're going for our third in a row."

"This year we'll be taking the prize again," Paris assured.

Meanwhile, for his next plan, Paris is getting a step team together. He has been stepping for 10 years.

"I do it very well," he said, smiling modestly.

The Door also does crucial outreach work on the Christopher St. Pier, traditionally a hotspot for L.G.B.T.Q. youth, on Friday and Saturday nights. The work began in 2006, with a grant from the City Council, after complaints from residents and businesses in the area about noise from young people hanging out in the area.

The Door's outreach specialists provide counseling and referrals to the young people on the pier. The work is especially important because many of those L.G.B.T.Q. youth are homeless or street-involved. Forty percent of New York City's homeless youth are L.G.B.T.Q. In the last 11 months, The Door has made 1,300 outreach contacts on and around the pier.

Aside from the benefits to the L.G.B.T.Q. youth themselves, community members say the organization's outreach efforts have been very effective in addressing the original complaints.

"My view is that the work they did has been fabulous. It would be 10 times worse if it weren't for them," said Arthur Schwartz, chairperson of Community Board 2's Waterfront Committee. "They've made an impossible situation manageable."

He noted with relief that funding for The Door's outreach work had found its way into the 2009-2010 city budget.

The Door's work on the pier, according to Remy, has made many in the community "look to us as advocates." She noted that the organization had been invited to a pre-Gay Pride safety forum with the Police Department, M.T.A. and Port Authority.

Back at The Door on a recent afternoon, the building's open, brightly painted ground floor was teeming with young people. Several huddled around a game of Bingo, while several more availed themselves of the organization's Dance Dance Revolution (DDR) video-game machines, which are "very popular," said Remy. In various corners, others pored over homework assignments.

As Remy walked through the building, she was greeted by smiles and high-fives from the young people who have gotten to know her during their years at The Door.

"It's about providing a space for young people that is safe, and that has caring and trustful adults — about being a trustful adult to these people," she said. "It's an honor when young people let you take that role."

For Paris — who said he spends time at The Door whenever "it doesn't interfere with my scheduling" — what this place and its staff provide is something he couldn't have done without.

"I'd probably be at home sitting in front of the TV watching something," if not for The Door, he said. And if this welcoming refuge had not been there at all?

"I would probably be stranded out in the streets."