

*The following remarks were written by Nicholas Oakley, CCYJ's Senior Director for Public Policy & TTA, and originally delivered at CCYJ's Pride Kick-off fundraiser on May 29, 2025. They have been modified slightly for print.*

I am here to tell you about the reason, despite all of our current adversities, that we can celebrate Pride this year. And I will get to that...

But, first, I want to start with a borrowed phrase that you may have heard if you have been to a CCYJ event before: *the least, the last, and the lost*. It sums up the value—or lack thereof—we all too often place on the young people who find themselves in our foster care system, in juvenile court, and on the streets. I think about this phrase just about every day as it is the reason I am at CCYJ and have been with CCYJ for over 12 years.

Actually, expanding the boundaries of the circle of human concern—to embrace the so-called least, last, and lost—has been a core value of mine from a young age, even if I did not have that language to describe it at that time. It is why I took a job as an attorney representing children, taken from their families, for reasons that resulted from unaddressed trauma that had been accumulating for generations. I supported other, abused and neglected adolescents for whom the state refused to intervene. I saw youth who were stigmatized as “junkies” when they self-medicated because they did not have access to healthcare. Others were derided as “juvenile prostitutes” because they traded sex for money or a place to stay because they did not have options when the people who were supposed to care for them abandoned them.

Then I joined CCYJ, *for the same reason that CCYJ was founded*: to change the systems that allow what I have just described to happen and, also, because CCYJ believed we needed a specific effort on behalf of LGBTQ+ young people experiencing these forms of trauma. CCYJ recognized that the trauma is different for these kids.

We, the LGBTQ+ community, can relate. We know what it is like to experience unique forms of trauma on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. For some, the defining trauma is the AIDS crisis. We remember being the least, the last, and the lost, as evidenced by the then President's silence as thousands of us suffered and died. For others, it is being banished from our homes—the excommunication from our mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters. It is the slurs from our neighbors. It is our bosses letting us go under thinly veiled pretenses. It is the Harvey Milks, the Matt Shepherds, and the Pulse nightclubs.

It is denying the first openly transgender member of congress, Representative Sarah McBride, access to the bathroom and knowing that it represents an attempt at complete erasure.

Yet, I think about the journey from hiding who we love to legally marrying them, and from suffering from “gay cancer” to a blue pill that prevents HIV. I think about being able to go home and turn on Netflix and see characters that represent our community. I know that we are seeing so much violence, vitriol, and vilification, but many of us in the room can also recognize a sea change. Some of us are better equipped to weather the storm we are all facing.

We are a community vastly diverse, yet joined by a common experience. We share the challenges and strengths that come with having a sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression that defies an ill-conceived, yet pervasive definition of “natural order.” Whether we like it or not, this defiance carries tremendous weight in the world in which we live.

We are the LGBTQ+ community—bound in our rejection of the rigid order that says there are only two options for the human experience, and bound by a celebration of the truth that the combinations of human identity, expression, and attraction are infinite.

I believe it honors our individual experiences—our trauma, our struggle—when we are able to recognize when we have relative privilege within our community. It is a clear demonstration of just how much we have faced, just how much we have learned, and just how much we have gained when we step back and stand with those who now need our support the most.

And I am here to tell you, our LGBTQ+ kids in foster care, before courts, incarcerated, and on the streets need our support the most. This is especially true for the transgender, non-binary, and gender expansive youth in these systems. If you have turned trauma into triumph, then please help us help them.

I am not talking about saviorism. *I am talking about solidarity.*

Whatever social ill drives you--fuels your passion--you will almost certainly see it play out for these young people: family rejection, homelessness, violence, healthcare disparities, discrimination, isolation, and marginalization. Racism; yes, racism. Up to 80 percent of LGBTQ+ youth in some of our systems are of color. It is not because of who these youth are, but because of what they experience as a result of being who they are.

We have youth who make gut-wrenching statements like, *"If the people with authority don't think I'm an equal human being, why should I?"*

These are our youth. In our public systems. Taken into our custody and care.

But there is hope. I recognize that that may be difficult to believe right now. We at CCYJ took a small research effort on the experiences of LGBTQ+ youth that we published in 2014 and turned it into a decade of progress across eight counties in Washington, including in rural areas. More than just training, we provided ongoing assistance and consultation, developed internal capacity, built resource directories, and fostered a statewide network. We leveraged the trust we had built across the state to bring systems leaders to the table.

We changed the way Washington thinks about equity for systems-involved LGBTQ+ youth. One social worker told us,

*“I used to think...they deserve the same opportunities as other youth in care. Now I think...I have to work harder to make sure they have the same opportunities as other youth in care.”*

This is notable because when we change the hearts and minds of professionals like these—and give them skills and connect them to resources—we are not just serving one young person. Many of these folks will serve youth for 10, 20, or 30 years. They are going to serve hundreds, if not thousands of young people. They are going to train their colleagues. They are going to change the culture of the work environment.

However, our ability to keep moving forward, to sustain and expand, is under serious threat. The state agency in charge of foster care and juvenile rehabilitation pledged to fund statewide implementation of our work over the course of six years – to bring safer and more affirming care to LGBTQ+ youth in all 39 counties in Washington. We spent months developing a detailed plan and they made public announcements. We were excited and ready. Then the Department let us know that they were not going to be able to pay for it.

We then went to the legislature to ask for the funding, but you may have heard that Washington is facing a 12 to 15 billion dollar deficit over the next four years. We are seeing severe cuts across programs and it has been described as a moral emergency. Our request for funding was denied.

But, we are not giving up. That is not who CCYJ is. We know we can create lasting change. In a national political climate that favors *uniformity, inequity, and exclusion*, we can be the state that provides a safe harbor for LGBTQ+ youth who need it the most. We need you, though, to make it happen. We recognize that the state ultimately needs to take accountability and pay for this work, and we will not stop until that happens. However, we need resources for our advocacy. And we need resources to fill the gap for LGBTQ+ youth during this time of crisis and until government funding is secured.

If you are new here, we are asking you to join us as we continue to fight for progress. And if you are an old friend, we are asking you to stick with us as we navigate the current political and budget woes.

***We are asking you to join or remain in an LGBTQ+ cause that almost never makes the headlines.***

***We are asking you to use your words, actions, and wallets to demonstrate to our LGBTQ+ youth that they are not the least, the last, nor the lost.***

***We are—I am—asking you to remain with us until our kids are fully recognized as worthy, made a priority, and seen as the humans they are.***

Will you say yes?

If so, then there is the reason we can celebrate this Pride.

Thank you.