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THE BLOG

Be a Better Ally: How to Support Your Transgender Friends

11/15/2013 07:18 pm ET | Updated Feb 02, 2016

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Nov. 11-17 is Transgender Awareness Week, during which many organizations and community groups work together to raise awareness about [important issues](#) facing transgender people. On Tuesday the [Young Leaders Council of Fenway Health](#) hosted an interactive and thoughtful discussion about what it means to be an ally for the transgender community.

We heard from two panelists: [Donnie Collins](#), a college student whose fraternity brothers banded together to raise over \$20,000 when Donnie's insurance refused to cover his medical expenses, and [Grace Stevens](#), who works with businesses to develop respectful, inclusive policies and a culture of acceptance.

I consider myself a strong ally for the LGBTQ community (I work at [Fenway Health](#), after all), but this event really broadened my understanding and taught me a lot. When asked how the world could be a better place for trans people, Grace responded, "If they could not fear losing everything when they transition." Wow. Donnie commented on how children are taught from a young age what is "appropriate" for their biological sex and cautioned, "We don't want kids to feel unsafe expressing themselves." We need to stop saying things like, "This is just a phase," and just let them be.

John Lewis, one of Donnie's fraternity brothers who helped lead the fundraising efforts and supported Donnie all along, made several insightful comments about being an ally. He didn't know many trans people before Donnie, but he said that after they became friends, "his fight became my own." He talked about having lots of questions and being nervous to ask them, but then being grateful when Donnie took the time to answer. Perhaps most importantly, John reminded us all that it's a continuous learning process for everyone involved.

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- **Listen.** That’s probably the most important thing you can do for any person who is sharing their story with you. Simply being present and giving them your undivided attention is huge.
- **Thank them.** They’re taking a huge risk by sharing themselves with you, so be sure to thank them for their trust. Let me repeat: It’s a big deal, so say “thank you.”
- **Share acceptance.** All people — regardless of who they are or what their situation is — are searching for acceptance. Donnie and Grace explained how many times people hear their stories and try to validate them and their choices. In reality, they aren’t looking for you to judge or even to validate, just to accept and appreciate them for the person they are.

Not only was this event educational but it was uplifting. One of our hosts stated rather poignantly, “There is a beauty, strength, and resilience to transgender people.” Grace taught us that it’s never too late to be who you are.

Conversations like these remind us that we are living in an exciting time! LGBT rights are progressing faster than they ever have before. My favorite quotation of the night? John’s simple yet bold truth: “People need to look out for people.... It will change, for the better.”

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