



Belonging

How your support creates
a home for 2SLGBTQAI+ youth



**Covenant
House**
Vancouver



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To our Covenant House Vancouver Family,

When I was asked to write the introductory letter for this special issue of *Belonging* that focuses on the 2SLGBTQAI+ community, I was immediately struck by how much has changed for this community since I joined Covenant House Vancouver 10 years ago.

For one, there's an overrepresentation of 2SLGBTQAI+ within the population of youth experiencing homelessness: various studies, including information released by the Canadian Poverty Institute, estimate that between 30% and 40% of this population are 2SLGBTQAI+. Life on the street is incredibly challenging for all young people, but this population has unique needs and is at an increased risk for exploitation and violence when they are precariously housed. Fortunately, I have also witnessed a significant increase in specialized support available to these young people, both here at Covenant House, and elsewhere in the community.

In my time as a Youth Worker, and now as the Manager of the Rights of Passage program and Chair of the Rainbow Advisory Committee, I have observed that the vast majority of 2SLGBTQAI+ youth end up on the street (and, hence, in our programs) because they've been rejected by their families and communities. When 2SLGBTQAI+ youth come to Covenant House, they may need a place to stay or a hot meal, but they're ultimately seeking a sense of belonging. They, like everyone, need a place to be safe and be seen and accepted exactly as they are in order to flourish.

While we have always treated the youth who stay with us with unconditional love and absolute respect, tailored services that create a sense of belonging did not always exist at Covenant House Vancouver. It was, in fact, a gap in our services when I started here. Today, I am both impressed by, and proud of, the frontline staff and members of the Rainbow Advisory Committee who have advocated diligently and passionately over the years to change this. You can read more about how we support 2SLGBTQAI+ youth on pg. 12. One example of this support occurred last year, when Covenant House Vancouver marched in Vancouver's Pride Parade for the first time, as a way of communicating to the city, our community partners, and the youth we serve that we are deeply, vocally, and visibly committed to supporting 2SLGBTQAI+ youth.

The overrepresentation of these young people at Covenant House indicates that society is constantly telling them they are different and do not belong. It also tells us we must continue to do better; and we will. We want 2SLGBTQAI+ youth to know that they do belong — not just with us, but in the world at large.

With gratitude,

Colin Rachel

COLIN RACHEL (HE/HIM)

Manager, Rights of Passage Program
Chair, Rainbow Advisory Committee



Understanding 2SLGBTQAI+ Identities

Young people from this diverse community are overrepresented in the homeless population due to a variety of factors such as discrimination and family rejection.

Understanding who 2SLGBTQAI+ youth are, where they come from, and embracing their differences is an important part of creating a welcoming environment where they can thrive. All of which starts with language and identity.

2S/TWO-SPIRIT: An umbrella term used by many Indigenous communities on Turtle Island (what is referred to as North America) to describe people with diverse gender identities, gender expressions, gender roles, and sexual orientations. Two-Spirit people were included and respected in most Indigenous communities, sometimes considered sacred and highly revered. They often took on important roles as healers, mediators, and warriors. It is a term that should only be used by Indigenous people.

Covenant House Vancouver places 2S at the beginning of the 2SLGBTQAI+ acronym to acknowledge that Indigenous peoples were on this land first.

LESBIAN: A woman who experiences romantic or sexual attraction primarily to other women.

GAY: Someone who is primarily attracted to those of the same gender; often used when referring to men.

BISEXUAL: Someone who is romantically, emotionally, or sexually attracted to more than one gender, or one's own gender and other genders. A bi person may feel equally attracted to many genders, or may experience stronger attractions to one gender while still having feelings for others. This ratio of attraction may vary over time.

TRANSGENDER: Transgender, frequently abbreviated to trans, is an umbrella term for a wide range of experiences and identities for people whose affirmed

gender does not align with the gender they were assigned at birth. Being trans is something that can only be decided by an individual for themselves and does not depend on external criteria, such as surgery or hormone treatments.

QUEER: An umbrella term used to refer to the spectrum of non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender people. It also provides a convenient shorthand for the acronym 2SLGBTQAI+. It is important to note that this is a reclaimed term that was, and sometimes still is, used as a hate term, and thus some people feel uncomfortable with it.

QUESTIONING: A term sometimes used by those in the process of exploring personal understandings of their own sexual orientation and/or gender identity, as well as those choosing not to use another, more specific label.

ASEXUAL: Someone who does not experience sexual attraction to others. Sexual attraction is different from romantic attraction. Asexuality can be considered a spectrum, with some asexual people experiencing desire for varying types of physical intimacy. This desire may fluctuate over time or by person.

INTERSEX: General term used for a variety of features in which a person is born with, or develops, reproductive or sexual anatomy, genetic makeup, or hormonal levels that do not seem to fit the current, "typical" definitions of male or female. Intersex has replaced the term hermaphrodite, which is widely considered to be outdated, inaccurate, and offensive. An intersex person may or may not also be part of the trans community, however the terms intersex and trans are distinct and should not be used interchangeably.

CISGENDER: A gender identity that society considers to "match" the biological sex assigned to someone at birth.

NON-BINARY: A collection, continuum, or spectrum of gender identities and expressions, often based on the rejection of the assumption that gender is strictly an either/or option of male/men or female/women, based on the sex assigned to a person at birth. Some non-binary individuals may also hold trans identities, but the terms non-binary and trans are distinct and should not be used interchangeably.

Note: Definitions were taken and/or summarized with permission from QMUNITY, BC's Queer, Trans, and Two-Spirit Resource Centre. If you would like to learn more, please refer to their Queer Glossary: https://qmunity.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Queer-Glossary_2022_Digital.pdf

Why Trans Advocacy Is Important

There is a great deal of misinformation in the world when it comes to the lived experience of trans youth.

Most of these trans youth experience barriers that may not even occur to non-trans folks. The challenges they face range from day-to-day issues, to incredibly serious discrimination and abuse. For instance, imagine trying to use a public wash-room as a trans person when only binary “men’s” and “women’s” options are available. Trans youth can face transphobia when looking for housing and mistrust can accompany that phobia, so trans youth may lose out to cisgender applicants.

“If you listen to the 2SLGBTQAI+ community, they will tell you what they need to thrive in this world.”

Receiving an income assistance cheque, filling out a job application, and getting a driver’s license all require your legal name, so trans youth are constantly being reminded about the person and the life that they no longer identify with. The cost of legally changing your name and identity is often out of reach for many trans youth.

Being misgendered and not having pronouns respected is also a regular experience for trans people, and can lead to feelings of alienation and rejection. Trans youth often end up on the street because they are literally rejected by their families.

Most seriously, statistics on the trans rates of suicide or trans rates of homicide show that it really is a matter of life and death to understand and accept trans people. For instance, in a Canadian survey of transgender and gender-nonconforming youth aged 14–25 years, 64% of participants reported that they had seriously considered suicide in the previous 12 months.¹

For all of these reasons, and so many more, it’s imperative that the cisgender population strive to understand and respect the experiences of trans people. If you listen to the 2SLGBTQAI+ community, they will tell you what they need to thrive in this world.

¹ *Suicidality among sexual minority and transgender adolescents: a nationally representative population-based study of youth in Canada.* Mila Kingsbury, Nicole G. Hammond, Fae Johnstone and Ian Colman. CMAJ, June 06, 2022



Acceptance: It Can Be a Matter of Life and Death

YOUTH STORY:

JADEN*, RIGHTS OF PASSAGE

* Youth names and identifying details have been changed for privacy reasons

There is insidious disinformation out there that problematizes and pathologizes trans folks. What is armchair philosophy to some people results in harm for trans folks, here and around the world.

Kadee (she/her), Lead Spiritual Care Practitioner at CHV, and Lisa (she/her), a Social Worker, share their experiences of working with Jaden (they/them), a trans youth who came to CHV in 2020.

At age eight, Jaden ran away from home. Being a trans youth in South Asia was extremely challenging. Jaden was caught and brought back to the family home, where they were hidden from society. Moving to Canada did not change things. Jaden was not allowed to have many friends, and when they wished to express themselves through art they had to do so in private, at home and away from their peers.

The family thought that they were protecting Jaden, but they were doing the opposite. Coming to Canada was the first time that Jaden's parents heard the term trans. They thought that it was a Western cultural enigma, and that Jaden would grow out of it and revert to Wendy, the daughter they thought they knew.

Jaden came to CHV from a hospital setting, as they were dealing with psychosis and suicidality that stemmed from their family not allowing them to be themselves. At that time, Jaden's art was very dark — black and white compositions full of dead or decaying images.

Initially, Jaden wanted to be called Rogelio, and use he/him pronouns. Rogelio did well in one-on-one interactions but had challenges navigating social expectations. Rogelio started out in the Crisis Program and soon transferred to the Rights of Passage program. Even early on in their stay at CHV, Rogelio stated that "CHV is the best thing that ever happened to me!"

Over time, Jaden came to realize that they identified as both a man and a woman. Now, Jaden looks at their gender as an expression of how they feel that day.

When they see their family, Jaden now takes pamphlets that pertain to the trans community to try and help them understand. Jaden has learned to have conversations about these issues via text messages, as a means of protecting their mental health and having healthy boundaries. Jaden wants to be a part of the family dynamic, but on their own terms.

A regular occurrence at CHV is teatime, hosted by Kadee. It's a time for youth to gather with Kadee, have tea and chat in a very casual setting. Kadee has noticed that Jaden has begun to practice self-care, and shared that, "It's wonderful to see that in the non-dictating space we provide, Jaden is exploring who they really are. For some, being trans is a linear process where the internal self and the external self align, but I can see that having both a male and a female presence is very true to who Jaden is. It's a privilege to see someone trust their own voice and trust their own sense of what they need and who they are."

Last year, Jaden was able to celebrate Pride for the first time, and their Pride artwork was made into posters and pins. Jaden's artwork has gone from black and white to a flourish of colour and celebration. Jaden, who is quite shy, is now reaching out to 2SLGBTQAI+ groups to meet other young people. Jaden also wants to use what they've learned from their experiences to work with and support other youth.

Jaden's mental health is stable, and it's been a year since they've had an episode of psychosis. They've used their artistic talents to create a comic book to help parents understand what it's like to live as a transgender person. Feeling liberated enough to express themselves has been a huge win for Jaden.

Recently, Jaden met with family and told us that their family called them Jaden for the first time! That was the first expression of acceptance that Jaden has received from their family.

Gender affirmation surgery is a medically necessary treatment for transgender people, and it is lifesaving. The procedure is associated with significant reduction of psychological distress and suicidal ideation, as well as other improvements in quality of life. (Harvard School of Public Health)



Although Jaden is thriving, their story could have ended quite differently. It cannot be stressed enough how crucial the immediacy of mental health care is when a young person requires it.

Organizations like CHV that support queer youth are important in the community because, as Kadee puts it, “We see the difference it makes to have a hospitable place for trans, non-binary, and other youth across the gender spectrum. If you believe in helping young people flourish, then supporting trans youth is important, across society.

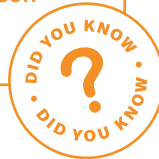
For youth to have the experience of ‘I am loved, I am welcomed, I’m respected, not in spite of who I am, but knowing exactly who I am,’ is something that they take from Covenant House, that serves them for the rest of their lives. And then, they advocate to make that true for others.”

Lisa adds, “If you’re not open, you’re not going to experience all the great things they have to offer. If you’re closed-minded, they’re not going to share. So we’re shutting down a whole population of individuals that could give so much to our society.”

Somberly, Kadee states, “Queer youth from non-Canadian cultures, where they’re not accepted at all, also end up on our doorstep; well, the lucky ones end up on our doorstep. The other ones end up in much more dire circumstances.”

Passionately, Kadee closed the interview with, “Do you understand how beautiful and amazing these young people are?!”

If you’re not sure what pronouns a person uses, try introducing yourself with your own pronouns before asking them. Remember not to single any one person out when asking.



“Some think that being trans is an intellectual exercise — I’m here to tell you that it’s not. We watch youth move from being profoundly unwell when they arrive at Covenant House to flourishing.”

KADEE (SHE/HER)

LEAD SPIRITUAL CARE PRACTITIONER,
COVENANT HOUSE VANCOUVER (CHV)

How We Support 2SLGBTQAI+ Youth at Covenant House

Every young person who comes to Covenant House Vancouver does so for complex and highly personal reasons, which is why we've adopted a one-size-fits-one style of personalized care.

That said, some populations are grossly overrepresented, both on the streets of Vancouver, and in our care. The 2SLGBTQAI+ community is one of those groups – these youth have often been rejected by their communities simply because they've taken the courageous step to show up in the world exactly as they are.

The trauma from this kind of rejection, coupled with the unique challenges of being precariously housed or without a home, leaves youth in this community vulnerable and in need of specific supports. Through a variety of therapeutic and extra-curricular services and activities, we strive to show 2SLGBTQAI+ youth that they are safe – and loved.



THE RAINBOW ADVISORY COMMITTEE (RAC)

The Rainbow Advisory Committee is comprised of 2SLGBTQAI+ staff from various roles and departments at Covenant House Vancouver. The committee acts as an advisory group to management and exists to ensure that youth from the 2SLGBTQAI+ population are being served well by the agency, and provided with the care and support they need to heal from their unique traumas. The group was formed in 2018 as a response to the increasing overrepresentation of 2SLGBTQAI+ youth, both on the streets and in our care.

MENTAL HEALTH CARE AND COMMUNITY-SPECIFIC ART THERAPY

Art therapy is one of the cornerstones of mental health care at Covenant House Vancouver. It's been shown to reduce the impacts of trauma and help young people process complex experiences. The vast majority of youth we serve at CHV have experienced significant trauma, and 2SLGBTQAI+ youth have often suffered very unique and particular forms of trauma because they have been ostracized by those closest to them. By offering specific art therapy sessions (both group and individual), we provide young people with the tools they need to manage their own mental health. Art therapy also creates an opportunity for youth to form deep-rooted and healing relationships and a renewed sense of community.

PARTNERSHIP WITH QMUNITY

Partnership with other agencies is an important component of the work we do at CHV. We understand that sharing resources across the city is one way to better serve youth. One of our strongest partnerships, especially for 2SLGBTQAI+ youth, is with QMUNITY, a drop-in resource centre that provides specific services for this population. In addition to providing referrals for our young people to utilize QMUNITY's resources, we'll also be hosting a series of employment and employee rights workshops, specifically for 2SLGBTQAI+ youth, in our new Drake St. building.

PARTICIPATION IN PRIDE

In 2022 we participated in Vancouver's Pride Parade as a way to signal to all 2SLGBTQAI+ youth that we are committed to vocal and visible allyship. Our van was decorated entirely by youth art from art therapy sessions in the month leading up to the event. We also hosted a booth that celebrated the strengths and accomplishments of queer youth at Covenant House, instead of focusing on the challenges they face. The event was an incredibly joyous and empowering celebration, and one that we will return to every other year moving forward.

MAKING SPACE TO BE SEEN, HEARD, AND CELEBRATED

Being seen, heard, and celebrated for exactly who you are is something many 2SLGBTQAI+ youth have never experienced. To foster community and a general sense of acceptance, we offer events, workshops, outings, and services across our programs, specifically for this community. Creativity, play, and fun are also a big part of these offerings — a reminder that, despite hardship, queer youth deserve to celebrate who they are and find their own unique expressions of joy.

Events include:



Queer art therapy sessions



A subscription to OUT TV in our lounges, to promote visibility



Queer trivia nights in the Crisis Program



2SLGBTQAI+ volunteers, particularly for outings in the community and fitness classes



Drag lessons hosted in the Crisis Program



2SLGBTQAI+ nights at our Drop-In Centre that include spa treatments, boardgame tournaments, and other fun activities

IMAGE CREDIT: Yasmeen Strang

Exercising Advocacy

DONOR SPOTLIGHT:
MAUREEN WILSON, SWEAT CO.

Whether at her fitness studio, Sweat Co., or at Pride, Maureen Wilson is always exercising her advocacy for youth in the 2SLGBTQAI+ community. Sweat Co. has been in Vancouver for 39 years, but this successful studio comes from humble beginnings and personal experiences.

Born and raised in Vancouver, Maureen faced some challenges as a young teen. “My family moved a lot, so I was always changing schools. I had to make new friends everywhere I went. I felt awkward, like an outsider.” Maureen did not feel accepted.

“I was lost, and moved out of the house when I was a young teen. Things could have gone quite differently for me. Fortunately, I found my passion and I found supportive people that wanted to help me.”

In the early 1980s, Maureen decided to go back to dance, an activity that she enjoyed as a child. “I thought, ‘this is my jam!’” Soon, Maureen was teaching up to fifteen classes a week. This is when Maureen and a friend decided to open Sweat Co.

Maureen said that the 2SLGBTQAI+ community had always been a part of her world. “It just never occurred to me that other people wouldn’t be as inclusive. There are so many young people who end up on the street because their families won’t accept and love them as their true, authentic selves. I wanted to use my platform to support youth and be a strong ally.”

Maureen’s clients range from 16 to 95 years of age and are from a diverse range of identities and backgrounds. Maureen has trained clients who have been



Two of Maureen's happy Sweat Co. clients

scared to come out to their parents. “I started to see that, wow, we really have a long way to go. And that’s how things shifted for me.”

In 2006, Maureen came to Covenant House to donate some clothes. She witnessed an interaction between a youth who came in seeking food and the staff member behind the desk. The staff member explained to Maureen that having snacks was the beginning of building trust and rapport with youth. Once a relationship is established, staff can talk to youth about the Drop-In Centre, and all of Covenant House’s services and programs.

Maureen said, “That did it for me. It is important to get these young people off the streets, before the predators get to them.”

Not only does Maureen donate to Covenant House Vancouver, but she uses her platform at Sweat Co. to engage with clients who may not understand the plight of youth or the 2SLGBTQAI+ community. She will explain how vital services like Covenant House are in the community. Some of her clients now support Covenant House Vancouver as well.


Maureen encourages everyone to find their passion and philanthropic spirit. “It feels good to give back!” she says. She understands that not everyone can support youth monetarily, so she encourages others to actively engage any way they can — through volunteering, advocacy, and mentoring, for example. Approximately eight years ago, Maureen became a Big Sister to a young person. “Sometimes, just having someone to talk to can make a world of difference for someone who is struggling.”

Covenant House Vancouver cherishes the support and compassion that Maureen brings to all the young people that we serve.

Thank you, Maureen.

Last year, Covenant House Vancouver supported over 60 trans and/or gender diverse young people





“There are so many young people who end up on the street because their families won’t accept and love them as their true, authentic selves. I wanted to use my platform to support youth and be a strong ally.”

MAUREEN WILSON (SHE/HER)
OWNER, SWEAT CO.



Covenant
House
Vancouver

A sense of belonging
is integral for 2SLGBTQAI+
youth to thrive. Thank you
for loving all young people
unconditionally.

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