

**Presenter:** Corinne Goodwin

**Description:**

Have you ever wanted more from your local support group? Would you like to start one in your area? One size does not fit all in the trans community and whether it is information, social activities, activism or access to resources, nowadays many trans people are looking for more than a monthly meeting when they join a transgender support group. Like many support groups, LV Renaissance has seen the need to change with the times. In this seminar, participants will hear how LV Renaissance has modified its mission and activities along with the obstacles the group has faced in doing so.

Agenda

- What makes a good support group experience?
- Personal case study
- Things to keep in mind

What makes for success?

- Drivers are things that move the process forward, things that work
  - welcoming
  - there was a support group specifically for the needs they had
  - space for everyone to talk
  - Guidelines on behavior, clear expectations
  - responding openly to people
  - short responses, facilitator doesn't dominate discussion
  - enough time
  - structure that supports the group
  - facilitator manages conversation
- Drainers are things that stop things from progressing, don't work for you, maybe the reason you didn't go back
  - Facilitator takes up too much space with their own story
  - friction between participants, open disagreements
  - lack of listening
  - derailment from the primary concern, side talking, off-topic talk
  - infrequent meetings
  - overbearing personalities
  - too many people—not a lot of intimacy
  - inappropriate comments, slurs
  - ill-fitting boundaries
  - ground rules missing or not followed
  - nonbinary erasure or exclusion
- Disclaimer
  - everyone's experience and viewpoint is unique
  - personal experience will color our perceptions
  - different language works for different people

Case Study

- 2012
  - she was miserable and looking for support
  - also feeling shy & lazy
    - a lot of trans people in early transition are afraid to “get out there”
    - yeah I stayed home a lot in early transition
  - searched the internet
    - found a list of psychologists & ONE group that was across the state—five hour drive
    - also a link to a local LGBT center that was JUST a website
    - and a really great group specifically for kids
  - No help, several years of misery
- 2014
  - feeling better, seeing a therapist—got a referral to a local support group
  - website didn’t make the group super accessible
- What I found
  - small group of older trans women
    - average age “well over 60”
  - a lot of angst—the same 2-3 people kept talking about the same problem all the time, feeling that she couldn’t talk about her needs
  - people were very opinionated—“let me tell you all about how to be trans”—I got a half-hour lecture on how to be trans
  - the same people came every month
  - A group of 20 people, 8-10 at each meeting, talking about the same things every time
- What We Did
  - Came in, took over
  - clarified our mission & vision
  - redesigned website/brand
    - because the brand was only speaking to this group of older trans women
  - focused on content
    - and on accessibility—maybe they don’t want a support group but they did want legal transition info
  - social opportunities
    - learn about leaving the support group space and living a fuller life
  - sought out resources
  - got involved with the broader community
    - including the LGBT community and the broader cis community
  - expanded our reach
- mission/vision
  - vision: be the go-to source of support and resources for trans people in the Lehigh Valley

- when someone thinks or googles transgender they find Renaissance
  - mission: improve the lives of trans people and their families and friends by providing:
    - peer support
    - safe social opportunities
    - access to resources
    - community outreach
  - Over 6,000 trans people in our service area—but was only serving 10-20
    - we wanted to serve 6,000
- refreshing our brand
  - more friendly & open website
  - Content additions
    - resources like stock letters for medical transition needs
    - utilized by the community AND their providers
  - search optimization
  - pictures of real people help give newbies a sense that they KNOW people already
  - invite people to join virtually
    - a lot of people don't really want to go to a support group and "feel special"
    - think about communities on Facebook, Instagram—ways people are more comfortable engaging
  - printed materials align with mission
    - rack card/trifold/posters
    - drive readers to the web

## Broadening our Reach

- monthly visits increased by 2000%
- most visited pages:
  - local resources
  - spouse and SO resources
- before: very few visits each month, largely from people already being served
- after: thousands of people a month from 50 states, 19 countries, but 80% of visits are from the service area
- Meeting attendance also significantly increased, from about 10 to about 40:
  - communication
  - content, speakers, activities
    - last month a voice therapist came in and talked about her services
    - a few times a year, doctors will come in and talk about HRT, surgery, etc

- Challenges:
    - meeting management can become a challenge with high participation
    - Group is dominated by women, which makes it difficult to make newbie men and genderqueer folks feel welcome and like their interests are being discussed
- Measuring engagement:
  - 2x monthly email update about events in the local community
  - email list got 8x bigger
- expanding services
  - trans support group—
    - “open” support group, available to trans people, spouses, family members, really anyone
    - mostly serves trans women
  - Parents of trans kids group
    - originally developed as a trans “family” group but it was one spouse and 40 parents/grandparents
    - run by a parent of a trans kid
  - Trans masculine group
    - trans masc people do not feel welcome in trans women spaces
    - question: did trans women feel offended that they did not have their own space? Not really. A trans masc person facilitates.
  - still need to
  - groups meet monthly, rotating between the topics
- Positive social environments
  - shopping trips—close down a store and have all visitors trans. Try on, style, connect with business as trans-friendly
- Conference groups—sending people to conferences where they can be around other trans people and learn
- Trans Awareness Events
  - reaching out to cis people, normalizing trans people for them
- Trans Day of Remembrance events—one secular, one religious
- Influencing cultural groups to incorporate more trans content
  - people who come to those events are not coming to meetings—this is another way to serve the local community that don’t need support groups

## Creating Alliances

- Connecting with Bradbury-Sullivan LGBT Community Center, which donates space for support groups
  - helped when the org had no money, and couldn’t buy insurance or rent space
  - able to get insurance by becoming an affiliate program of LGBT Community Center

- became a 501-3C in order to receive donations and fundraise
- YWCA
- ACLU
- Woods Campground
  - world-famous LGBT campground with an active leather community
  - Mr. Woods Leather 2017 picks Renaissance as his charity to support—\$3000 in cash donations, and over \$2000 in makeup from MAC
    - Wouldn't have found us if we didn't have a good website with web optimization

Now—Sounds awesome right?

- Got new friends out of the support group
- Able to open up and create deep bonds for the first time because these people GET her
  - btw this is the benefit of sitting around in an awkward circle and talking to people
- advice when I needed it
  - talk to people who have been there and get referrals to a lawyer, a doctor, etc
- a sense of mission

Important Lessons

- We have challenges
  - reach is still a problem—are we really getting to those 6,000 people (who are really probably 10,000)?
  - diversity, age, and involvement
    - our meetings are lily white—doesn't reflect the local population
    - local population is 30% Hispanic and 8% Black—“where are they?”
    - not reaching millennials
  - Succession plan
    - the president has been president since 1998—she's going on 70 and she wants to move somewhere and retire
    - nobody really wants her job
    - always be thinking about long-term personnel
  - Support for significant others
    - they've tried but nothing has come together
    - their support helps our transition go better—how can we make sure they're
  - Money & budget
    - programs cost money—how do we keep it coming in?

- we provide food at every meeting, and some people will only eat that today

### Ask yourself good questions

- Why do you want to start a support group?
- who do you want to serve?
  - frequently people come in to navigate transition and then leave—we're not serving people longterm
  - this is a self-fulfilling issue, because people who come in to talk to later-transition stuff will feel like they don't have a good resource in a group that's focused on 101 stuff
- what are your goals?
- when/where should you meet?
- what services will you offer?
- how will you find members?

### Be aware of the traps

- "This won't take much time"
- "everyone will have my level of enthusiasm"
- "all leaders will share my vision"
- "we will have the funds necessary to succeed"
  - we ask people to donate \$3 at meetings, and about half of them can't
- "people will come in droves and donate their time and money"
- "I won't burn out"
- "the group won't survive without me"

### Questions & Discussion

- How do you handle people who go off topic or over time?
  - Use a codeword to gently remind people about time
  - if the group is small, talk about how to allocate time up front—we have 30 minutes, which is about 6 minutes each
  - "thank you, I'm hearing that you have a lot to contribute but I'm curious about what other people think about this."
  - "the refrigerator"—let's put that topic in the refrigerator and we'll come back to it later
  - facilitator can say "we're going to move on to the next topic"
  - in a big group, everyone can't talk so sometimes nobody talks
- How to gain diversity:
  - have you thought about hiring facilitators of color
  - tried adding people of color to materials but it didn't bring people in
  - targeted outreach to communities that may be less familiar with support groups or that use different language for their identities
- Off-topic conversations & alienating talk
  - Check in with people about group norms

- Clarify expectations at the start of the meeting
  - someone might say something offensive or that bothers you, their needs are as important as yours.