

Jewish Gay Center Teaches Tolerance

Rabbi Josh Lesser honored by Georgia Center for Nonprofits

By Zack Hudson

REBECCA STAPEL-WAX KNOWS THAT PATIENCE, coupled with persistence, can yield big returns for a person with a mission.

As director of the Rainbow Center, a Jewish non-profit education and outreach organization for gay men and lesbians, Stapel-Wax and the center's goal is to spread a message of tolerance for gay people within Jewish communities and organizations in Atlanta.

One way she helps do this is by leading a group of volunteer ambassadors — gay Jews — into schools, synagogues, and community groups to begin dialogues. At least sometimes, their audiences aren't exactly thrilled to see them.

"Once we get in the door, we're very effective. Just getting your foot in the door is quite a feat though," says Stapel-Wax, a lesbian.

THE RAINBOW CENTER WAS FOUNDED IN 2001 by leaders and concerned citizens from Atlanta's Jewish communities, including Rabbi Josh Lesser, who on May 16 was awarded the Georgia Center for Nonprofits' inaugural Revolutions Leadership Award.

Lesser is currently on a one-year sabbatical as the spiritual leader for Congregation Bet Haverim, a Reconstructionist synagogue founded by gay men and lesbians. He expressed deep gratitude for the recognition.

"What has been most transformative for me in my work in the larger Atlanta faith community is that people are more accepting than I ever imagined," says Lesser, who is gay. "When other people of faith recognize that I care about and work on issues that affect all people like homelessness, affordable housing, the environment, they have been more inclined to listen and understand where I come from in advocating for GLBT civil rights."

Stapel-Wax explained Rabbi Lesser's work on social justice issues to the GCFN awards committees, paying particular attention to his work with the Rainbow Center.



BOSTON | DENVER | SAN FRANCISCO

Working for the full inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Jews in Jewish life

www.keshetonline.org

“His social justice efforts needed a different avenue. He’s a fantastic storyteller, and he’s an incredibly sensitive person. They trust him, and because of that, he has made a significant change within Atlanta’s faith communities,” she says.

Lesser says that working for all social justice efforts will ultimately benefit everyone, regardless of what group they fall in.

“If we look closely enough we can see that we are not isolated dots on a page, we are actually connected by something larger. Justice and human rights is every person’s inheritance,” he says.

IN ADDITION TO SENDING ITS AMBASSADORS OUT TO educate others about tolerance, the Rainbow Center offers service referrals through Jewish Family & Career Services, which is one of the center’s sponsors. Other sponsors are the Jewish Federation of Greater Atlanta and Congregation Bet Haverim. The center operates on a \$20,000 budget for 2007, and employs Stapel-Wax on a part-time basis.

The Rainbow Center’s real work lies within its education initiative. The ambassadors take their presentations in front of audiences as young as middle school age children, and as old as 90 and above, according to Stapel-Wax.

“We get them to talk about being Jewish, and most of them realize they’ve been targets for being Jewish. We talk about the stereotypes for Jewish people, and they see the similarities in how much the stereotypes about Jewish people are equally as disturbing as the stereotypes for gay men and lesbians,” she says.

Highlighting subtle intolerance can have a profound effect, according to Stapel-Wax.

“People will change their behavior once they allow themselves to realize disagreements aren’t necessarily wrong,” she says.

So far in 2007, center volunteers have given presentations to 18 different groups.

The center, which reaches out to various faith communities as well, uses morality principles to illustrate its messages.

“We talk about assumption. We have them read a story about a gay, Jewish man shopping at Christmas time. We talk about how he must have felt at the end,” Stapel-Wax explains.

The ambassadors engage their audiences with interactive dialogue, and questions from both sides of the stage. “We ask them, ‘Would you stand up for someone who is being targeted for



BOSTON | DENVER | SAN FRANCISCO

Working for the full inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Jews in Jewish life

www.keshetonline.org

being Jewish?’ And we ask them, ‘Would you stand up for someone who is being targeted for being gay?’” she says.

And for the groups who don’t respond to invitations from the Rainbow Center, Stapel-Wax vows to maintain her gently persistent efforts to engage them.

“I am never giving up on a group that doesn’t call me back,” she promises.

Posted with permission from Zack Hudson and [The Southern Voice](#).



BOSTON | DENVER | SAN FRANCISCO

Working for the full inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Jews in Jewish life

www.keshetonline.org