

BREAKING THE FOURTH WALL

LGBTQ+ Youth Experiencing
Homelessness are Healing
Trauma Through Art
and Performance at the
Youth Empowerment
Performance
Project

Story By Tyra Nicole Triche
Photos via Youth
Empowerment
Performance
Project

“I come from experiences that were extremely complicated, harmful and traumatizing,” Bonsai Bermudez reflected. “As a queer, femme person in Puerto Rico living in a very conservative household community environment-very religious, very machista-I went through a lot of suffering.” (Note: Bermudez uses she/he/they pronouns interchangeably. For the purpose of clarity, we will use the pronoun “he/him/his” to reference Bermudez in this article.)

On February 23, 2003, Bermudez attempted to take his life.

After years of going to psychiatrists, therapists and multiple hospital visits, he realized that none of these things were truly effective. His past traumas were not being addressed in ways that were useful for their restorative process.

A dancer since the age of 12, and having studied theatre in college, Bermudez had a passion for art and performance. To work through his past anguish, he says, he had to get back to his roots.

“I had to develop my own journey of healing, and art continued being that main tool for me to really go as deep as I could through the darker places that existed in my life,” he says. “Art was that thing that kept me alive, kept me going, and kept me in hope that [life] could look different for me.”

It was this experience of using art to work through his trauma that inspired his choice to go back to school to become a therapist, which allowed him to use his theatre background. On March 1, 2011, he formally founded the Youth Empowerment Performance Project, also known as YEPP. YEPP seeks to aid

25 LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness work through their

experiences, explore new ways to confront adversity and find strength through theater performances that they write- based on their own life stories.

Bermudez acts as YEPP's Executive and Creative Director. He says the healing performance program is the heart of YEPP, but they also have three other programs for the queer and homeless youth that find themselves at YEPP. Located on the corner of W. Addison St. and N. Reta Ave., the organization hosts a leadership program, an initiative to deconstruct violence amongst the community called CUTE (short for "Creating Unity for Trans and Gender Non-Conforming Equality") and other general arts programming.

There are no membership requirements for YEPP's programs. Bermudez says that the youth he's worked with are simply looking for a place where they feel seen, heard and cared for.

"We aim to create the safest space that we can create here for people to relax, and do that self discovery work in ways in which they can reconnect with themselves. In a way that they can start looking for ways to break free from what is happening in their lives, heal, explore options and bring more action into what they need to do," Bermudez says.

Malia Santiago is one of YEPP's Community Engagement Coordinators. She got involved with the organization in 2015 after moving to Chicago to pursue her career in performing arts. She says that she's previously been involved with programs that attempt to do work similar to that of which YEPP does, but they do it from a more clinical position than YEPP does. YEPP has been a more interpersonal experience for her.

"Being on stage and performing my own story was empowering because I was able to relive that moment in my life, but to live it in a different way," she says. "I was able to live that moment and reflect on it, and see where I could have done things better in life. I was also able to see things that were not my fault. That empowered me."

With the healing performance project, the youth work with a cohort of their peers for six to seven months, so they are able to create genuine relationships with one another. "To know that you have people to hold you when you're ready to fall on that stage is empowering," Santiago says.

According to a study by the University of Chicago's Chapin Hall-a policy research institution-LGBTQ+ youth are twice as likely to experience homelessness than their non-LGBTQ+ peers. Those who identify as LGBTQ+ and Black (or multiracial) have the highest rates of homelessness within this demographic. The study concluded that one of the most important aspects of organizations that effectively address LGBTQ+ homelessness are the services that "help young people re-establish positive and reliable connections in their lives."

"I want to believe that this is a non-transactional place," Bermudez says. "That means that we celebrate long term relationships, we celebrate relationships, point blank. We treat each other as human beings."

Those involved with YEPP become like family, and you can tell. When you walk into the building, everyone is welcoming. As you walk up the stairs and past the primary colored stained glass, it's a space that's



teeming with love. And *love*, according to Santiago, is something that Chicago is lacking.

“It’s the hardest place to live in America, almost,” she says. “And if you can make it here, honey, you can make it anywhere else.”

Santiago is a trans woman of color who is currently experiencing homelessness. Her gender identity has made it challenging for her to secure a job, which in turn makes it difficult for her to find permanent housing. Along with the lack of love here, “Chicago is slow, and doesn’t have enough resources for the amount of people who are here,” she says.

This is something that Ka’riel Gaiter, YEPP’s Community Engagement Coordinator, has witnessed first hand. Having experienced homelessness since childhood, Gaiter first got involved with YEPP in 2013 and has since secured permanent housing. He reflected on spending hours waiting in lines to sleep in shelters or get access to food banks. The resources that Chicago has geared towards ending homelessness are also centered on the city’s North Side, he says. This makes it particularly challenging for queer youth of color on the South and West Sides to access these means.

Bermudez says that while the city has been making efforts to alleviate homelessness, he’s worried the city of Chicago and leaders in this community are recreating things that are not working,” he laments. “From a harm reduction place, some people and some communities are meeting their needs. I’m just concerned that the most, most, most vulnerable people are still unseen and unheard, and still on the streets.”

“Those other organizations don’t really teach

you how to come up out of cycles, where as YEPP does,” Santiago says. “YEPP teaches you to dig deep within self and face those traumas. To find better ways to deal with those traumas and break through from those cycles. They do it through art, and I think that’s the thing that really makes it stand out.”



The theatrical performances that YEPP produces are written by the LGBTQ+ youth and based on their real life experiences.

“Being on stage and performing my own story was empowering because I was able to relive that moment in my life, but to live it in a different way. I was able to live that moment and reflect on it.”



YEPP performs for audiences across the country.