

TRANS PROGRAMMING AT THE 519 CHURCH STREET COMMUNITY CENTRE

A Case Study in Social Entrepreneurship

Rebecka Sheffield, MSt.
rebecka.sheffield@utoronto.ca

Background

This case study forms part of the Social Entrepreneurship project developed at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) under the guidance of Dr. Sean Kidd (Principal Investigator) and Dr. Kwame McKenzie.

With funding from the Population Health Improvement Research Network (PHIRN), Drs. Kidd and McKenzie assembled and led a committee composed of recognized leaders in service provision among Aboriginal, LGBTQ, immigrant, refugee, and homeless persons to determine the programs and organizations in Toronto that have broken new ground in conceptualizing and developing mental health services in each of these sectors.

The goal of this project was to use a case study approach to learn from the people who have transformed innovative ideas into highly effective services – to articulate the models upon which their services are based and the implications of their work for policy development—to share new ways to more effectively address the pervasive health disparities that exist in our society. The project culminates in a knowledge transfer event held at the MaRS Discovery District on March 3, 2011.

Trans Programming at the 519 Church Street Community Centre was selected to be profiled as an agency that works with LGBTQ populations from a social entrepreneurship approach. Community members acknowledged that the service was developed through a grassroots approach with few resources, has faced and overcome many barriers in its development, and can offer lessons to other service organizations about how to provide more effective services to communities and groups who are for the most part poorly served in the area of mental health services.

Methodology

Information for the case study was gathered in two ways. First, background research on trans history, the 519 Church Street Community Centre, and Trans Programming was gleaned from published texts (e.g., the organization's website, staff manuals, newspaper clippings and Dr. Susan Stryker's groundbreaking *Transgender History* (2008 Seal Press)). Published interviews with former staff and publications documenting their experiences working with these programs were also consulted. Second, four lengthy (2-3 hour) unstructured interviews with key informants provided a coherent narrative about the development of and current services offered by Trans Programming. Two of the interview participants are current staff of the 519 Church Street Community Centre and two are former employees of the 519 and were involved with the development of the programs that now fall under the Trans Programming umbrella. A long serving Office Manager of the 519 was also interviewed briefly to obtain her recollections the early beginnings of Trans Programming. The case study is written in journalistic style to best convey the richness of the story and avoid interrupting this narrative with citation notes.

Trans Programming at the 519 Church Street Community Centre: A Case Study in Social Entrepreneurship

The 519 Church Street Community Centre is a vital meeting place and service provider for Toronto's LGBT community. Situated on Church Street, just south of Bloor, the 519—as it is commonly known—sits at the epicenter of the Church-Wellesley Village, one of the city's most diverse and vibrant neighbourhoods. By some accounts, the Village has been a meeting place for gay men since the late 1700s, encouraged in part by the well known magistrate and merchant Alexander "Molly" Wood, who once owned the fifty acres of land that now comprise the neighbourhood. In subsequent years, the Village attracted many gay men and lesbians from smaller towns and outlying communities, many of whom migrated to the city in search of safety and community. By 1975, a sizable population of gay men lived in and around Church Street and the area became known as Toronto's Gay Village. The fledgling community, however, remained underserved until a dedicated group of neighbours successfully lobbied for the city-owned building at 519 Church Street to be converted into a community centre. Initially, the services provided by the 519 were not designated for lesbian or gay clients; at the time, most LGBT people were closeted. However, as the social climate for gays and lesbians eased throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s, and legislation prohibiting homosexual contact was overturned by the Trudeau administration, more and more LGBT people began to access the services provided by the 519. The Centre quickly became known as a safe space for LGBT people. Over the years, hundreds of LGBT organizations, such as the Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights in

Ontario, Salaam: Queer Muslim Community, and Pride Uganda Toronto, have used the space available at the 519 to hold meetings, organize advocacy campaigns, and serve their communities through peer support and mental health interventions. Today, the 519 receives core funding through the United Way and continues to offer a wide spectrum of internationally renowned programs and services to meet the needs of the LGBT community and the broader Church-Wellesley Village.

Since 1997, the 519 has supported Trans Programming, a multi-service program that serves the transgender, transsexual, and Two-spirit community, with a focus on lower-income, street-involved, homeless, sex-working and marginalized members of the trans communities. This includes Meal Trans, a food drop-in with a legal clinic and a housing worker; Trans Youth Toronto, a drop-in for youth; Trans Sex Worker Outreach, providing safer sex education, condoms and lube to trans sex workers; and Trans Access, a trans awareness training program for service providers. The Transition Support group provides peer support for trans people considering transition from one gender to another, and the FTM Support Group serves female-to-male trans people. Over the past decade, Trans Programming has also participated in several research projects and short-term programs such as Getting Primed, a training project for AIDS prevention workers who work with trans men, and the FTM Safer Shelter Project, which explores access for trans men and FTMs into the hostel and shelter system.

For many Trans people in Toronto, Trans Programming is a lifeline, providing information, referrals, peer support and employment opportunities in a social climate that does not otherwise embrace trans identities. Gender identity is not a protected class in the *Canadian Human Rights Act*, nor is it included as an identifiable group in the Criminal Code under Section 318 (Canada's hate crime law). Recently, several private members' bills have proposed the addition of gender identity, sex, or gender to the list of identifiable groups, but the discussion is only at beginning stages in Parliament. Thus, Trans Programming provides respite for trans people who have experienced transphobic violence and who have lost jobs or work in marginalized trade because of their trans identities. Many participants in these programs are not only looking for support, but also bring with them the desire to change the social and political environment for trans people. In response, Trans Programming staff work toward improving accessibility for trans people in social services agencies, serve on governmental committees to ensure new policy includes trans people, and advocate for the human rights of trans people across the country. They also strive to connect participants with the larger community of people struggling for equality, including people of colour, people with disabilities, refugees, seniors, and others, to help build partnerships that contribute to a more inclusive social and political environment.

Kyle Scanlon, the Education, Training and Research Consultant at the 519, knows very well the struggles of trans people who access Trans Programs. A native of Hamilton, Kyle was a member of the McMaster University queer students' organization and a prolific volunteer at local social services agencies. In the late 1990s, he moved to Toronto and began transitioning; he also began attending the Meal Trans drop-in as a participant. For some time, he worked as a media monitor, but was forced to leave this position after experiencing transphobic discrimination. He quickly found work with Toronto's Lesbian Gay Bi Youth Line, where he became the first trans man to be the Executive Director of an LGBT agency in Canada. At the same time, Kyle was asked by the 519 to consult on a number of projects that were under development, so he spent weekends and evenings working on funding proposals and program development for Trans Programs. In an interview with Kyle for this case study he explained, "I recognized that I had a huge level of resources at my disposal that a lot of people that I knew in the [Trans Programs] didn't have. So I wanted to reach out and help work with that population." Today, Kyle coordinates Trans Access and facilitates trans awareness training for service providers. He provided a rich and detailed overview of Trans Programming and how they have evolved over the past thirteen years.

Like Kyle, Morgan Page, Trans Community Services Coordinator at the 519, also brings to her work lived experience and a passion for working with trans people. A former sex trade worker, Morgan is an affecting and charismatic activist who has advocated for trans rights and safer sex work since moving to Toronto from Hamilton in the mid-2000s. When interviewed, Morgan explained that she is particularly interested in the history of trans activism in Toronto and has spent considerable time researching the work of Mirha-Soleil Ross, a performance artist, sex worker and activist to whom Morgan attributes the early successes of Trans Programming. Without her dedication, Morgan asserted, Trans Programming might not exist. This level of gratitude for Mirha-Soleil Ross was echoed in an interview with Christina Strang, Morgan's predecessor at the 519. Now a case manager at a North York shelter, Christina worked with Trans Programming in the early years, often in concert with Mirha-Soleil. Jake Pyne, former coordinator of Trans Access, was also interviewed for this case study. Although Jake began working with the 519 around the time Mirha-Soleil's involvement with Trans Programming was coming to an end, he was able to convey several anecdotes about her broader contributions to trans activism as a whole. In addition, Jake was helpful in piecing together the lasting legacy of Mirha-Soleil's work at the 519. Mirha-Soleil was not available to participate in this case study, thus the story of her involvement with the 519 is told through Jake's and Christina's remembrances and the research Morgan has compiled.

According to Morgan, Mirha-Soleil became deeply involved in trans and sex worker activism throughout the mid-1990s, sparked in part by the murders of three sex trade

workers on Victoria Day in 1996. The victims were Brenda Ludgate, 25, a Parkdale area sex worker, Shawn “Junior” Keegan, 19, a transgender sex worker, and Tom “Deana” Wilkinson, 31, a transsexual sex worker. The murderer, Marcello Palma, was known in the sex trade and, as Kyle recalled, was quoted as saying that he was ‘trying to rid the city of degenerate scum.’ Kyle explained,

[Palma] had been previously engaging in sex trade with trans people, but in a certain respect, this is not a situation unknown to women working on the stroll. They work with a lot of people with a lot of guilt and shame about their involvement with trans sex workers. They are mostly straight-identified men who, for whatever reason, feel that their attraction to trans women is abhorrent to them and so they seek it out in this kind of surreptitious, you know, marginally criminal way, and then they focus all of their disgust and rage back on the sex workers.

At the time of the Victoria Day murders, Mirha-Soleil was working in the sex trade and engaged in activism at the local and provincial levels, organizing protests and holding vigils for trans people hurt by transphobic violence. In addition, she was producing a zine for and about trans people called *Gendertrash* from Hell. The zine sold at local bookshops, including the anarchist bookstore in Kensington Market. Christina first got to know Mirha-Soleil through this zine and became involved in her art performances. As Christina remembers, Mirha-Soleil approached the 519 after the murders about the need to provide more advocacy and services for trans people, particularly those engaged in the sex trade. Mirha-Soleil knew that the 519 rented out space to a support group for men transitioning to women. Members tended to be middle-class, educated and white, and many had children from previous marriages. As a result, Mirha-Soleil felt that the group did not meet the needs of less privileged trans women who were engaged in the sex trade, lived in poverty, and came from non-white backgrounds. She was also aware that some trans men had been meeting at various spaces throughout the city, largely within a lesbian feminist culture not always accepting of trans women. According to Morgan, Mirha-Soleil was quite vocal in her opposition to what she perceived as an exclusive support group culture. Morgan summarized Mirha-Soleil’s stance as, “I don’t like this lesbian feminist stuff because it excludes me as a trans woman and a sex trade worker; I don’t like this middle class or upper class support group culture that doesn’t speak to my experience at all and they probably don’t even want me there. And at the same time I’m seeing all these friends who are dying from HIV and AIDS and having bad dates and getting killed, like Junior Keegan.” In Morgan’s opinion, the Trans Programming at the 519 started because Mirha-Soleil was able to use the anger and momentum propelled by the Victoria Day murders and translate this into productive advocacy. Morgan imagines Mirha-Soleil “going to the management [at the 519] and saying,

you know what, we're being murdered, we're dying of HIV/AIDS, and no one is taking care of us and we need to be on top of this. And as the queer community centre of Toronto, you either need to shape up or ship out."

Helen Rykens, Office Manager of the 519, remembers the situation from another perspective. At the time of the murders, she recalled in a brief interview for this case study, the only organization working with trans people was PASAN—Prisoner' AIDS Support Action Network. Morgan discussed PASAN as well:

In Toronto, specifically, in the early 90s, there were no organizations working with trans people—not a single one—until PASAN, the Prisoners AIDS Support Action Network—they're incredible. They started working with trans people all on their own, without a community member coming to them and saying you need to work with us. They were just seeing more and more trans people, trans women, specifically, in the prison network and realized, ok, we need services. Which is pretty incredible.

Toronto Public Health was also beginning to recognize the gap in services for trans people and the department looked to the 519 for help. As Helen recalled, the Board of Directors was offered funding for three months to investigate the needs of the trans communities and establish a service in response. The 519 created an eight-hour-per-week position and when it was posted, few people applied. They did, however, receive an application from Mirha-Soleil Ross and she was hired immediately. Despite her meager salary, for three months in 1997 Mirha-Soleil invested more than sixty hours a week to survey trans people and find out what type of service was most desired. At the end of the contract, Mirha-Soleil recommended that the 519 establish a drop-in program that offered a healthy cooked meal. The Board was impressed with her work and extended her contract so that she could establish what became the Meal Trans program. Each Monday night since 1998, trans people are invited to gather in the second-floor kitchen to enjoy a hot meal and meet other trans people as a way to build peer support. Recently, housing workers and legal professionals have been invited to attend Meal Trans as a way to provide a one-stop-shop for trans people who need access to these services.

As successful as it was, however, Meal Trans did not include outreach to sex workers, a service that Mirha-Soleil felt was imperative to trans community development. Trans activist and scholar Vivien Namaste quotes Mirha-Soleil extensively in her 2005 book *Sex Change, Social Change*:

I think most people don't understand the gravity and breadth of the situation. They don't see the day-to-day violations of prostitute's most basic human

rights. They don't see our vulnerability and can't grasp how much the criminalization of prostitution affects our work and our lives; how much it impacts us emotionally, socially; how much it costs in human lives....When you look at the majority of transsexual, transvestite, and transgendered people who are attacked, raped or murdered, being a prostitute and being part of that specific social and cultural context seems to be a common denominator. So realizing that almost all trans victims of violence are prostitutes, you have to start asking serious questions about societal attitudes towards prostitution. You have to investigate how such attitudes might contribute to—or perhaps even constitute the main determinant in—making trans prostitutes targets for hatred and attacks. And you also have to consider, in addition to transphobia, other facts such as racism and misogyny. (*Sex Change, Social Change*, “Interview with Mirha-Soleil Ross,” *Women's Press* 2005, p91)

Mirha-Soleil advocated to the 519 Board and management that she establish an outreach program that would meet the needs of sex workers. She also insisted that the program staff have lived experience in the sex trade. Already impressed with the success of *Meal Trans*, management agreed and Mirha-Soleil established the *Trans Sex Worker Outreach Program* in 1999.

The *Trans Sex Worker Outreach Program* (TSWOP) is a strategic initiative based on a harm reduction model and provides targeted information and support for trans sex workers who are at high risk of acquiring Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) or other sexually transmitted infections (STIs). The purpose of the outreach is to reduce barriers to safer sex. This program is funded through the City of Toronto's AIDS Prevention Community Investment Program, which was established by City Council in 1987 to support community initiatives of this kind. Outreach Workers are trans community members with expertise in HIV/STI prevention and have experience working within the geo-political and social climate of sex trade work. Until 2008, Outreach Workers spent considerable time working at street level, offering free condoms, information and peer support to trans women who worked in and around the Church-Wellesley Village. They also spent some time attending bars and clubs used by trans sex workers. However, the focus of their outreach has shifted recently due to an overall change in the nature of sex trade work within the Village. As Kyle discussed, the 'tranny stroll' has nearly disappeared in the wake of new real estate developments, changing community demographics, and decreasing tolerance for street prostitution. Morgan also emphasized the importance of changes to the stroll since 2008. By way of explanation, she described a situation that erupted during the summer months of 2008 among residents of the Church-Wellesley Village and trans sex workers. She considers the events of this summer as a tipping point in the mobilization of sex workers and their

advocates to challenge Ontario's prostitution laws and feels that this effort deserves further attention. However, the ramifications of these events have also had profound impact on the work of the Trans Sex Worker Outreach Program by reducing avenues of contact for Outreach Workers to meet with trans sex workers. This situation deserves further explanation.

Nestled between Toronto's iconic Allan Gardens and the lively grounds of Jarvis Collegiate Institute, the tree-lined streets of Homewood Avenue and Maitland Place showcase some of Toronto's best kept homes. Residents of the area—an eclectic mixture of business professionals, small business owners, young families, and elderly retirees—work diligently to keep their yards neat and their front porches tidy. During the day, the air is filled with the cheerful voices of kids playing in the local playground. Friendly neighbours often greet one another while out walking their dogs. The peaceful residential stretch is a homeowners dream. At night, however, Homewood and Maitland attract a very different crowd. For decades, the area has been known as Toronto's 'tranny stroll'; from sunset to sunrise, transsexual and transgender prostitutes own these streets. Not surprisingly, there is considerable tension among residents and sex trade workers who have been known to disrupt peaceful nights and encroach on pristine lawns. Even residents who support sex trade work have grown increasingly intolerant of the noise and violence associated with street work.

Since June 2008, some residents, led by organizer Michel Bencini, have formed nightly patrols, aggressively challenging prostitutes to take their work out of the residential neighbourhood and move to nearby commercial corners. Bencini is also the founder of the Homewood Maitland Safety Association (HMSA), a group of about twenty residents who have launched a campaign to move the stroll by discouraging johns from accessing the area. For several months, HMSA demonstrators picketed the corner of Maitland and Homewood, and photographed the licence plate numbers of any potential johns. Sex workers were also verbally harassed as they attempted to communicate to potential johns. This aggressive harassment of trans sex workers encouraged advocates of sex trade work and trans activists to issue statements of support for opening up safer spaces for trans sex work. In addition, activists such as Gerald Hannon and Wendy Babcock took to the streets themselves, often acting as human barriers between angry residents and trans sex workers. Morgan explained that she was also present at many of these protests and served as a human shield for trans sex workers, an experience she said helped her bridge her experience in the sex trade and a growing passion for trans activism. It also piqued her interest in the work of the Trans Sex Worker Outreach Program, which led to her eventually joining the 519.

Although the aggressive tactics of the HMSA have now subsided, they received considerable attention from mainstream media (e.g., CBC, Toronto Star) and also by

community newspapers such as *Now Weekly* and *Xtra*, which serves Toronto's LGBT readership. In most cases, coverage described the situation with diplomacy—journalists rarely made statements in favour of any one side of the conflict. Nevertheless, the circumstances have produced profound consequences for the trans women who normally utilize this area for sex trade work. This has also made outreach work more difficult. Morgan explained, "Because of what happened during the summer of 2008, in the ensuing months, the residents went back and forth between continuing and not continuing their harassment. But the long and short of it is that they made enough of a problem that the police started cracking down in the neighbourhood, so now a lot of the women have moved out of the stroll, which means that we have no idea where they are." Morgan also expressed some concern over the safety of trans sex workers who have been arrested by police since 2008. Sex workers have reported to Outreach Workers that police have imposed physical boundaries on trans sex workers upon their release from custody—a legal action that usually requires invention by a Justice of the Peace. Even more concerning is the geographic location of the boundaries—Bloor to Queen, Yonge to Sherbourne. This area includes the Church-Wellesley Village and essentially cuts off trans sex workers from accessing the stroll and, in some cases, their own homes. Outreach Workers have met with distressed sex workers who feel they have no other choice but to leave the neighbourhood altogether. Outreach Workers fear that these trans women will not be able to access the support they need because coming to the 519 would violate their boundaries and put them in danger of re-arrest.

Some sex trade work has moved indoors to local clubs. As Morgan explained, the politics of these spaces is complicated and quite different from the culture of street work. Working indoors offers some benefits over street work; trans women have access to safer spaces, they can meet and talk with other sex workers, and they can rely on the club's infrastructure to support them if they feel they are in danger (i.e., there is always a bouncer present to intervene if necessary). On the other hand, trans sex workers must maintain a good relationship with each other and club owners or risk being banned from the property for disruptive behavior. Not surprisingly, this causes stratification in the sex trade, with indoor work as a more desirable location than street work; sex workers who can access indoor work usually do. According to Morgan, this stratification also causes tension within the sex trade: "...a lot of the women who work on the street really don't like the girls who work at [the clubs] and vice versa. And at [the clubs] it's sort of—I don't want to say a higher class—but it's very—there are definitely class issues that go on in the fights between them. And a lot of the girls who work the street have been banned from [the clubs] for fighting or whatever. Because they have a variety of issues going on in their lives and may not be so great at interacting with others."

When asked about differences in race among trans sex workers, Morgan initially responded that racialization was not a major factor in the stratification of the sex trade community. She replied, “When you go into [a club], the level of diversity among the women in there is astounding. There is one woman who is mute and a woman of colour who is doing sex work there...and it’s just like ‘You are amazing! I love you!’” This statement was followed by an outburst of Morgan’s infectious laughter. Morgan exudes passion for these women and the struggles that they face in a marginalized trade. Upon reflection, however, she noted that there is a divide between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. Aboriginal trans sex workers are almost exclusively street-based. She explained,

So, even women with disabilities are going [the club], women with hearing issues, there are a couple of different trans women with disabilities who work at [the club] and I think it’s just because I spend so much time in this white lesbian-feminist bubble that I just find this mind-blowing!...it’s quite interesting. And a lot of the women at [the club] are immigrants and newcomers. Whereas a lot of the women on the street—like, there are a few immigrants and newcomers on the street, but surprisingly most of them go to [the club]. The Aboriginal trans women, almost all of them have been banned from [the club], either permanently or temporarily. Or they just hate the people who go there. So it’s really quite the divide.

Access to finances also stratifies the sex worker community. Some women who have been forced out of the stroll have turned to online solicitation through websites such as www.shemalecanada.ca, or by placing classified ads in *Eye Weekly* or another local newspaper. While some ads are free or inexpensive, others can be quite costly. Furthermore, some newspapers will only accept classifieds from advertisers with escort business licenses, which are costly to obtain and require that licensees disclose their contact information to at least one level of municipal government. Morgan declared, “It’s the most ridiculous things ever and it costs so much money... It’s a huge barrier for women to come up with that kind of cash just so they can move indoors and then there is the question of, if you don’t have a phone and you don’t have a house, how can you move indoors.” Morgan also conveyed a story she had heard at a recent drop-in from a woman who had been working indoors out of her own apartment, but had not been able to pay rent. She lost her housing and moved into a shelter, but was now unable to work indoors. As a result, she is forced to look for work on the street despite cold weather and a diminished sense of safety.

Another possible consequence of the events in 2008 is that some trans women have left the sex trade altogether and turned to drug dealing to earn money. This pushes them further into marginalized work and, if caught by police, they face harsher legal consequences. Morgan also suggested that a substantial number of women continue to pick

up johns, but only to rob them of their cash and property. The Outreach Workers have reported that this behavior is not only risky for the women involved, but also creates a dangerous climate for other trans sex workers. If a john experiences a 'bad date', he may take out his frustration and anger on the next woman he picks up, leading to more 'bad dates' for trans sex workers. Yet another possible outcome of the HMSA harassment is that some trans sex workers have started utilizing alternative strolls. The primary users of these alternative strolls are Aboriginal trans sex workers who need to engage in street work because they do not have access to any other form of work. Morgan wondered if these women will eventually turn one of these areas into a new 'tranny stroll', which would allow Outreach Workers to reach women as they have before, but this remains to be seen.

In fact, the changes to the stroll have become a central concern for the Trans Sex Worker Outreach Program and Trans Programming as a whole. As Outreach Workers struggle to find ways to access an increasingly hidden community, Morgan is resolved to develop new strategies to reach trans sex workers. She explained, "Yeah, so the changing stroll environment has been a huge challenge and for us, as an agency, that's meant that our outreach now is not affective. So, in my position, over the last six months and continuing into the new year, is trying to find ways of reaching the women that we are not seeing, the women who have moved online, who are doing things only by phone." One idea that Morgan is considering is to help produce a series of web videos written and performed by members of the trans sex trade community. Each video would discuss a different topic related to HIV/AIDS prevention, safer sex, healthy living, and positive living (living with HIV). The purpose of the videos would be to draw women into the 519 for safer sex supplies, information and peer support. Morgan is also adamant that the videos address other issues such as intimate partner abuse, but the scope must fall under the purview of the program's funding restrictions.

When Morgan raised this idea of producing outreach videos with management, she was met with some skepticism. Although the idea of producing videos was celebrated overall, not everyone was convinced that they would be able to reach their intended audience. Many trans sex workers are, after all, living in shelters or in unstable housing. How would they access the videos? Morgan, however, knew that the strategy had legs. As a former sex worker, she has experience working in the trade and was aware of the environment in which many sex workers live. She explained, "Interestingly, a lot of the trans sex workers who are staying in shelters have cell phones—and really good cell phones!—better than my cell phone... OK, great, we can reach you that way!" In situations such as this, management of the 519 defers to the expertise of Trans Programming staff. Morgan and the Outreach Workers not only bring to their work lived experience and compassion for trans sex workers, but they are also part of the community they serve. In her role as coordinator, Morgan

draws on the lived experience of her team to develop interventions that will be accessible and will resonate with the trans sex trade community. Indeed, their roles within the Trans Sex Outreach Worker Program highlight the importance of involvement from community members; they are able to suggest innovative strategies for outreach because they are intimately familiar with the trans women who need support from the Program. As Morgan claimed, her team is not comprised of 'employees' but of peers. In some cases, Outreach Workers are the women with cell phones who live in shelters or unstable housing. They communicate and connect with other trans sex workers in a manner that a more professional mental health worker might not be able to accomplish. Morgan stressed that this level of participant involvement is a very different approach to mental health work than simply hiring staff based on their academic credentials, which she feels is the blueprint at most other mental health agencies in the city.

Participant involvement is a hallmark in Trans Programming overall. The Programs were conceived not only as service delivery, but also with a community development component. Perhaps the best example of this commitment to community development can be shown through the evolution of Trans Access (initially called the Trans Community Shelter Access Project and later known as the Trans Shelter Access Project). Before joining the 519 in 1998, Mirha-Soleil had expressed concern over the lack of accessible shelters in Toronto. In one issue of her zine, *Gendertrash from Hell*, Mirha-Soleil interviewed several shelter workers about their organization's policies regarding trans women who need to access their services. She found that most agencies, whether feminist or not, did not accept trans women. None of these shelters had policies in place that included statements about trans accessibility. Christina, who had come to know Mirha-Soleil through her zine and participation in the Meal Trans program, was also distressed by the challenges that trans women faced in gaining access to shelters and other mental health agencies. Christina had often heard stories from her Meal Trans peers about their rejection from mental health agencies. She recalled,

I heard the same story over and over again. 'I tried to get into this shelter and I couldn't. I tried to get into this detox centre and I couldn't. I tried to get into this mental health service and I couldn't.' There were more challenges with gendered facilities but there were still challenges with every single agency. There were very few places at that point that were willing and able to take trans clients.

Together, Christina and Mirha-Soleil began discussions about establishing a program that would address trans accessibility at shelters and provide training for shelter workers to help them create space for trans clients. Nicci Stein, a Program Manager at the 519, encouraged Christina to draft a funding proposal and submit this for consideration to the Supporting

Communities Partnership Initiative (SCPI). At the time, SCPI was a funding program administered by the federal government to provide cities with support for initiatives that aim to prevent and reduce homelessness. As Christina recalled, Nicci was so supportive of developing Trans Access that she sent her for training to learn how to write funding proposals, a gesture of faith that Christina has not forgotten. The proposal was written and the 519 was granted a small amount of money.

Christina's approach to working with shelters was jujitsu in its execution. Many shelter workers expressed a desire to provide services to trans clients, but simply did not have the knowledge or support from their agencies to improve accessibility. Consequently, the initial task of the project was to work with these sympathetic shelter workers to convey a message to management that the agencies needed to develop policies and protocols for dealing with trans clients. Then, with assistance from community members, Christina developed a training program that would produce a cadre of trans people who could offer workshops to shelter staff that would help them to better understand the specific needs of their trans clients. The training program, which is still offered today, takes place over several weeks and includes two major components: first, participants spend some time developing job readiness skills and second, they are provided with an introduction to social services philosophy and delivery. Upon completion of the training program, participants are not only be able to administer Trans Access workshops, but also have knowledge of social services that could help them secure more sustaining employment. Christina hoped that these participants would eventually find jobs at shelters and this would also work to improve the climate for trans people who needed access to these services. The more expertise in the community, the greater the capacity of community members to contribute to their own better health and wellbeing.

Jake Pyne was part of the first cohort to graduate from the Trans Access training program. Jake moved to Toronto from Northern Ontario in 2001, and almost immediately began attending Meal Trans drop ins. At the time, he was transitioning (the process of socially and physically changing from one gender to another). According to Jake, his first meeting with Christina was a whirlwind of excitement, passion, and information sharing about the funding she had just secured for Trans Access and the work that needed to be done to recruit the first cohort of trainees. Before the discussion had ended, Jake was enrolled in the training program. Several other participants were recruited through Meal Trans and other community contacts. By the end of 2001, Jake had completed the training and began offering workshops. When Mirha-Soleil left the 519 that year, Christina took over many of her responsibilities and Jake was hired to coordinate Trans Access. Jake held this position for almost seven years, an experience he claims pushed him to become a dedicated trans activist and to pursue a career path toward professional social work.

As Jake explained, Trans Programming was designed to react to the wants and needs of the trans community in Toronto. In addition, the programs were intended to encourage as much participation from community members as possible. Jake explained that the trans team made a conscious effort to give confidence to participants by consistently incorporating their suggestions into program materials. One example of this responsive approach is that the definitions of transgender and transsexual continue to change over time and within particular contexts. The team kept laminated cards on hand with definitions of trans- as teaching tools for new participants, outreach and training purposes. If a community member believed that the definition needed to be amended, Jake would make the necessary changes and create a new card. This responsiveness, according to Jake, not only helped the team learn from the community they served, but also showed participants that the team respected their experiences.

Community participation also distinguishes Trans Programming in another way. As Jake sees it, the programs were never set up as merely support groups for trans people trying to cope with marginalization and violence. Instead they were envisioned as advocacy groups with the capacity to inspire members into activism. As a result, participants not only found peer support but also achieved political goals such as helping change public health policy at the municipal level, and working toward amending federal human rights legislation to include gender identity as a protected category. Morgan, Christina, Jake and Kyle firmly believe that social transformation is not possible without first transforming service users into service providers.

In addition to participant involvement, the support and infrastructure of the 519 has been a key ingredient in the growth of the Trans Programs. At the most basic level, the 519 provides necessary office space and resources, but the involvement is more than just facilities provision. Christina believes that this infrastructure—with paid staff and permanent facilities—is paramount to the success and longevity of programs. In particular, she points to the Trans Youth Toronto (TYT) drop-in, a program that she established in 2001. Unlike its volunteer-run Ottawa counterpart, which recently folded due to lack of leadership, TYT has always had a paid staff member to step in and provide leadership during times of transition. Not only this, but in the early years, 519 management found creative ways to help support teambuilding activities, such as retreats and catered meetings as a way to build trust and partnerships among team members. The 519 management also worked to find funding to send participants to important community events, conferences and professional training to help them grow their expertise. In particular, both Jake and Christina noted the support and encouragement they received from program managers Nicci Stein and Janet Rowe, and from Bill Eakins (who passed away suddenly in 2005). Christina spoke at length about how program managers had consciously worked to

formalize the work of Trans Programming as a way to elevate staff from peer support workers to service providers. Nicci Stein, for example, discouraged Christina from fraternizing with Meal Trans participants while she was the coordinator as a way to establish professional boundaries. Christina was also sent for formal training in case management so that she might acquire necessary skills to provide support to participants. While at times Christina perceived such interventions as heavy-handed management, she soon realized that that push she received was necessary to institutionalize Trans Programming and therefore improve the likelihood of their long-term sustainability.

Jake made it clear, however, that the 519 consistently allowed Trans Programming staff to act autonomously, to make decisions about the scope and direction of programming as necessary. As a result, the offices of Trans Programming were often buzzing with conversation, doors remained open and unlocked, and participants wandered freely in and out of staff space. The casual structure created a feeling of collegiality among participants that Jake feels had some impact on the success of the programs. Participants were invested in work that the team produced. Christina and Jake were also able to hire community members into trainer positions and staff positions as they saw fit. One call, for example, did not require applicants to submit a resume or have references because Jake felt that this was a barrier to employment for most street involved trans people. Instead, they were asked to answer a couple of questions and given interviews. Jake laughed as he explained that the interviewees were sometimes intoxicated; one was so nervous that she would barely talk. Yet the relaxed standards allowed the team to make their own best judgments about who to hire or involve in the programs. Jake explained, “They provided plenty of support, there wasn’t an absence of support, but an absence of their presence. They got out of our way.” Such autonomy, he believes, is one of the strengths of Trans Programming and he wonders if this is one of the major reasons it has remained vibrant and relevant over the years.

Jake also recognized that program managers often acted as buffers between the team and the more formalized structure of the 519. Thus, the team did not always have to seek approval from various levels of management before embarking on a new project. One consequence of this more-work-less-process philosophy was that the team was able to make an impact in very little time with few resources. As Jake explained, the team produced leaflets, pamphlets, posters and other materials about their programs all on their own. They hired trainers and prepared training curriculum based on their own experience. They set their own goals and exceeded these. As a result, their statistics impressed funders. According to Jake, an early goal was to train 300 staff at shelters, but by the end of the year, they had trained over 3,000 staff members at a variety of community service agencies. He proclaimed, “Funders loved us!” The growth of Trans Programming also impressed the Board of Directors at the 519 and management were able to send Jake, Christina, and later Kyle to

conferences, workshops and other events to highlight the work that they had accomplished. In most cases, the support structure of the 519 was a lifeline for the team—as long as management allowed them to work independently.

For Jake, the importance of autonomy was highlighted when, for a period of time, an interim program manager challenged the independence of the team. As Jake explained, Trans Access had been successful in raising awareness among shelters and service agencies about the specific needs of trans women. As the program evolved, however, Jake became aware that considerable barriers remained for trans men who needed shelter or service assistance. Trans men did not feel safe in men's shelters, but did not necessarily want to access shelters for women. Jake realized that the program needed to begin researching the ways in which shelters could be made accessible for trans men. He became aware of a call for funding through the Wellesley Institute, a Toronto-based non-profit and non-partisan research and policy institute. After discussing the funding call with representatives at the Institute, Jake decided that they should put together an application. Around this same time, however, program manager Bill Eakin suddenly passed away, leaving an interim manager in charge. When Jake approached this manager to inform him that he wanted to put together a funding application to grow Trans Access, he was met with resistance. Since 1998, Trans Programming had grown quickly and effectively, surpassing all expectations. Nevertheless, new management was uncomfortable with the suggestion that the program should grow even larger, and recommended that Jake and his team should work with their current funded programs. Jake explained,

We really needed to do some research—the 519 had never really done research like that before. Wellesley Institute had a funding call and we had a really good shot at getting it, but the interim manager just clamped down and told us that we were not in an expansion period. We needed to cool it down. So the grant application was written in secret so that it would be done.... It just had to be done. We have this problem and we need to answer it. This is the next step. It just had to be done. But in the meantime, our time was being taken up by trying to justify why the trans program needed to apply for more grants. We were basically writing proposals to justify writing proposals.

The 'extracurricular' work did pay off in the end. Once Janet Rowe was hired as a permanent program manager, Jake sat down with her and explained that his team had prepared a proposal for funding. Rowe agreed that it should be submitted and Jake recalls literally running down the street to the offices of the Wellesley Institute to make the deadline. Trans Access did receive the funding and they were able to bring in more staff to facilitate the research that they needed to undertake. This situation also gave Jake and his team opportunity to reflect on the autonomy that they had under the leadership of Bill Eakins—under a more rigorous managerial approach, much of the work that had been done

to pull together Trans Access or Meal Trans program simply would not have been allowable. For the most part, the management team at the 519 bestowed incredible trust in the Trans Programming team and allowed them to do that they needed to do to serve the trans community—as long as the reported statistics met or exceeded expectations. And they always did.

Both Jake and Christina are nostalgic for these early years of Trans Programming when brainstorming sessions and feverish after hours grant writing kept dedicated staff buzzing with excitement. Yet not everything was smooth sailing for the Trans Programs. For one, salary could never fully compensate for the amount of hours staff dedicated to making programming happen; working with Trans Programming required flexibility, patience, and passion, as well as sixty to eighty hours of work each week. It is easy to see why some staff have bowed out of these high expectations over the years. Sustainable funding has also remained elusive. In fact, Jake left the 519 in 2007 after seven years of anxiously waiting, year after year, to learn if his position would be extended. Jake explained, “I grew up middle class in Thunder Bay, was in a position of privilege and always able to work until the funding ran out without worrying too much about finding more stable work. However, in 2007, I became a parent and came to the conclusion that I needed to find more stable work.” Kyle continues to worry that recent changes in municipal government will result in cuts to AIDS prevention funds that help support the Trans Sex Worker Outreach Project and other initiatives under Trans Programming umbrella. He also regrets having to charge a fee for trans awareness workshops due to inadequate funding.

A more subtle challenge for staff has been learning how to forge partnerships with other social service agencies that are not always willing or able to make space for trans clients. For example, Jake confessed to feeling incredible frustration when working with several feminist agencies that did not welcome trans women. Management refused to improve trans accessibility because they claimed that their cis-gendered clients would be in danger if they allowed trans women into women-only shelters. It was difficult for some team members to negotiate the anger and frustration that emerged through these difficult encounters. Jake said:

I think anger was part of our work and how we dealt with some agencies. We had to be angry, but in private. In our team meetings, we discussed how to deal with agencies who were not supportive, but when we went to visit them, we had to put on a good face. We positioned ourselves as a support to them and not as an advocacy group. It's simply not productive to go into agencies and show that anger. I think we found other ways to do it. Like helping trans people who had been kicked out of shelters or left on the street to file

complaints with the City. Then the City would get in touch with the shelter and then the 519 and request a Trans Access training.

Furthermore, Jake contacted more accessible feminist agencies and asked them to draft statements about their commitment to providing safe spaces for trans women. Many replied and a compilation of these statements was produced and copies delivered to all shelters, including those with strong objections to trans inclusion. These kinds of backdoor approaches to expressing anger proved useful in venting frustration and never disrupted the supportive position of the Trans Programs.

Morgan is more comfortable with exposing her anger. She reported:

My speech at Trans Day of Remembrance this year was all about anger. I think that many people come into trans activism with anger – any activism really – which is really great because it gives you passion and a drive. I feel that a lot of activists, in trying to build partnerships with other agencies, tend to leave the positive parts of their anger behind. And that this can lead to a sort of loss of vibrancy of the program that we create and the projects that we do because everything becomes about making sure that everyone is happy with this or the funder will be happy with this.

The public message of Trans Programming, however, is that they exist to support agencies, policy-makers and activists in their work to make the world a more accepting place for trans people. The supportive role is purposefully highlighted over the program's advocacy component. Nevertheless, Morgan emphasized that it is the advocacy piece of Trans Programming that keeps participants engaged and helps them build the skills necessary to move from service user to service provider.

For Christina, the success of Trans Programming is a clear equation: listen to the community, involve the community, build rich programs that lead to funding, and use this funding to grow more programs and help more people. Morgan agreed and added that the key to Trans Programming impact is that they are 'by community for community'. She explained, "Trans Programs have always been run by people in the community and our leadership has always been supported by the 519—it may be questioned now and then just to make sure that we have solid thinking on it, but the 519 has always supported our leadership in engaging our own community which has been really important." The team's persistence, passion, and dedication to the trans community over and above their own job responsibilities are also driving forces. After all, Trans Programming staff are not only working for the 519, but with the 519 to improve the lives of trans people, including themselves. Morgan went on to say, "I think if we were a different agency and hadn't have taken such a social entrepreneurship look at things, the trans programs would not be as

vibrant as they are today. We wouldn't have trans sex worker outreach, or if we did, it wouldn't be run by three women who all have sex work experience, two of whom are current sex workers.”

Further Information

The 519 Church Street Community Centre

519 Church Street | Toronto, ON M4Y 2C9

Phone 416-392-6874

Fax 416-392-0519

Email info@the519.org

Ashoka, Innovators in Public (Social Entrepreneurship)

Celia Cruz, Director (Canada)

366 Adelaide Street W, Suite 366 | Toronto, ON M5V 1R8

Phone 416-646-2333

Fax 416-646-1875

Email canadianinfo@ashoka.org

Centre for Addiction & Mental Health (CAMH)

250 College Street | Toronto, ON M5T 1R8

Phone 416-595-6015 (Media Relations)

Email media@camh.net

Rebecka Sheffield, MIST.

Doctoral Student, Faculty of Information

140 St. George Street | University of Toronto | Toronto, ON M5S 3G6

Email rebecka.sheffield@utoronto.ca