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LGBT suicides: End homophobia, save lives

We must support, celebrate our LGBT youth at CU and in Boulder

By Glenda Russell for the *Colorado Daily*

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Much has been written about the recent media coverage of suicides by lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (collectively, LGBT) young people. The sheer tragedy of the loss of young lives certainly warrants our attention.

Any particular suicide is sad and complicated. As suicidologist A. Alvarez suggested some years ago, a person's decision to commit suicide is as complex as any other of life's difficult decisions, including the decision to go on living.

That is true of the youths whose recent suicides have been in the headlines. Nonetheless, even in the absence of specifics, we can make some important observations about the suicide potential for LGBT youth in general.

We want to comment on two realities that exist in tension with each other. Although they may appear to be contradictory, both need to be understood on their own as well as in relation to each other.

First, the spate of news coverage might suggest that the suicides of young LGBT people represent something new. That is not true.

LGBT youths have been over-represented in population-based studies of suicide for as long as such studies have been conducted. At the same time, being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender does not, in itself, lead to suicide.

Rather, the elevated suicide rates among LGBT youths are rooted in their experiences of isolation, harassment and discrimination. Prejudice and discrimination are the culprits here -- simply and tragically.

The second point is equally important. It is undeniably true that prejudice and discrimination against LGBT people put these youths at increased risk for suicide. It is also true that, despite having to deal with pervasive prejudice and threat of discrimination, most LGBT youths are living engaged and productive lives.

They are going to school and to work. Many are building vibrant queer youth culture. Some are pushing for social change on many fronts. Others are living quiet lives that meld easily into the lives of other quiet members of their peer groups. Many are actively

challenging adults -- LGBT and heterosexual alike -- to rethink old notions of sexual orientation and gender identity.

Many LGBT youths struggle to find a comfortable existence in the face of the prejudice they see in their world and face in their daily lives, yet they move ahead. Some have the support of families and friends and schools and faith communities. They are building toward their own healthy adulthoods, complete with coping skills born of dealing with prejudice.

The reality of resilience does not diminish the reality of discrimination; they exist side by side.

These two realities point to the two most useful responses to the danger of suicide among LGBT youths. The first is obvious, but rarely acknowledged: if we decrease homophobia, biphobia and transphobia, LGBT youth suicide will decrease.

It really is that simple.

The second response: We must all recognize and celebrate the strength and resilience of LGBT youths and support safe spaces for them to grow and explore and become whole and healthy adults.

These lessons from the recent heightened coverage of LGBT youth suicide suggest that we all have a role to play in reducing the risk to LGBT youths.

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