

Network for LGBT Tobacco Control  
Fenway Health  
1340 Boylston Street, 8th Floor  
Boston MA 02215

IN THIS ISSUE:  
FROM QUEER YOUTH TO  
PUBLIC HEALTH LEADER



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SHARING OUR LESSONS  
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[www.lgbttobacco.org](http://www.lgbttobacco.org)



## From Queer Youth to Public Health Leader

A Case Study of Engaging and  
Mentoring LGBT Youth into  
Tobacco Control Leadership

With Sharing our Lessons we hope to highlight activities happening in the field of LGBT tobacco control and share the stories and voices of those fighting the good fight against big tobacco. We believe that a community driven network must be at the core of the movement and that sharing our stories is an important way to keep the community strong. Please contact us if you know of a project that can be featured in future issues of this publication. [lgbttobacco@gmail.com](mailto:lgbttobacco@gmail.com)

## FROM QUEER YOUTH, TO PUBLIC HEALTH LEADER



*Pack the bags, cope with airport delays, juggle with hotel check-in and then, finally, connect with your peers at a conference. Prepare talking points for your upcoming presentation, then ponder how to best inspire your audience to action. Next, hop on a cross-country flight to join the new steering committee that has recruited you. This scene, familiar to many public health professionals, is now familiar to Ernesto Dominguez of Portland, Oregon. Ernesto at age 22 is in his fifth year of organizing youth for tobacco prevention. Kitty Jerome traveled to Boston in February 2010 for the LGBT Network Steering Committee meeting where she talked with Ernesto.*

**KITTY:** Hi, my name is Kitty Jerome, interviewing Ernesto Dominguez for this “Sharing Our Lessons.” We are going to start by asking you [Ernesto] to talk about how you got to this place right now. What’s the work that you are doing in tobacco and youth? Then we will speak about your history in the movement.

**ERNESTO:** I’m 22 years old today, but I

definitely didn’t start on tobacco control this year. I’ve been in it for about five years. I started through the LGBTQ youth center in Portland called SMYRC, the Sexual Minority Youth Resource Center. They ran “Breathe Free,” a statewide LGBT tobacco prevention program. But I have to admit I wasn’t ready to jump on board of the tobacco wagon. I had friends who smoked, yet I never saw it as dangerous or bad, apart from it being really nasty or kind of smelling bad. I never thought back then that I could influence my friends, or the community that I live in, in regards to tobacco.

*SMYRC established an alcohol- and drug-free community space for Portland’s sexual minority youth in 1998. Intended for LGBTQQ ages 23 and younger, it remains the only resource center for them in Oregon. Volunteers aged 24 and older who staff the drop-in space are trained to practice youth empowerment and community building. A program of the non-profit Cascadia Behavioral Healthcare, the center also offers direct services. “Breathe Free,” for example, was funded by the Oregon Department of*

*Human Services Tobacco Prevention and Education Program to serve populations disproportionately affected by tobacco use and exposure.*

**KITTY:** Something happened during your time at SMYRC to bring about the leadership you now provide in the areas of youth empowerment and tobacco control. Let’s talk more about this.

**ERNESTO:** At age 16, I began working with Breathe Free, mainly focused on doing tobacco prevention. They created an opportunity for us to win prizes (in a contest to pick up cigarette butts and guess how many cigarette butts were in the jar.) And even though that didn’t click to me that that was tobacco work – to me it was just, “we’re cleaning up the park, and we’re getting some kind of reward for it” -- we ended up thinking about how many people are just throwing their cigarettes on the ground in a public park, and how much we’re damaging our own space. And so I began doing tobacco work without really knowing it.

**KITTY:** It sounds like one key ingredient that SMYRC had right, in the [recipe for engaging young people](#), was to draw you in with activities that did not feel like pure health education or didactic tobacco messages.

**ERNESTO:** Absolutely, Breathe Free succeeded without necessarily forcing the tobacco issue down my throat. Another project was to take the best picture that represents your community, or how you see young people, or Pride itself. I didn’t realize until the end that my favorite youth-specific Pride photo had multiple people holding cigarettes. Almost every picture that I took had smoking in it, and this representation was what hooked me. I loved the shirts from Salt Lake City’s youth group that said “Queers Kick

Ash.” [I wore it not because it was putting out a cigarette, but because it was cool to wear that](#) (because of the play on words.) Then in Portland, I came up with a slogan, “I’m too sexy for your butts” and pictured a stiletto heel or a cowboy boot putting out a cigarette. [This is exactly what tobacco companies do: they make something look cool to us.](#)

**KITTY:** So about the time you moved to Portland you started your involvement with SMYRC and then became involved in Breathe Free. Tell me more about how SMYRC empowers young people.

**ERNESTO:** Yes, SMYRC is such a brilliant space, and to this day I do volunteer work and fundraising for them. They are the most engaging and empowering organization I’ve ever worked with.

SMYRC has always been run by young people: the center was started by two youths who wrote a grant. [They saw a need to have a space for themselves and their friends to be safe and off the streets where they could just hang out.](#) We have an adult executive director and program staff, but in a lot of ways we give them their power, and at any point we can take away their power. The structure is one in which young people really lead the direction of the organization.

For example, every Wednesday at 6:00 PM whoever is in the space can participate in the steering committee. This is where the major decisions are made, such as planning the next event or determining how to spend the money we raised at Pride. The young people run the meeting. Since the adults are there to support and not to lead, they cast their votes after all the young people in the room have voted. This prevents the adults from influencing the youth vote. Although we often ask the adult staff for their assistance, we never ask for their direction.

**KITTY:** The ability to shape and govern your own youth space was important to the group. Can you give more examples of how this worked?

"SMYRC has given me a safe place where I can go, not having to worry about people calling me names or telling me that who I am is wrong. In all honesty, SMYRC has saved my life." —Dominique



3024 NE Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd, Portland, www.smyrc.org, 503.972.9664

For 11 years, SMYRC has been the only community-resource center for sexual and gender minority youth in Oregon. It prioritizes and celebrates LGBTQ teens and young adults, providing counseling, case management, education, and culturally-relevant resources.

**ERNESTO:** Young people created all the rules in the space. Adults enforce some of it, but mostly it's young people that enforce it for ourselves, because this is our space, we feel ownership over it, and are protective of it. **If we're not feeling comfortable, we're changing the rules to make it comfortable: that's what happened with our tobacco policy.**

**KITTY:** Tell me about the tobacco-free policy. What happened?

**ERNESTO:** There used to be smoking allowed in the SMYRC space. At first, the smoking was at the front of the building within certain feet from the door, then smoking moved to the back patio where we painted a line to mark the

smoking section. But we had a neighbor who loved to open her windows and get the fresh air in her house. On SMYRC nights she had to keep her windows closed, because cigarette smoke was coming into her house. She came over a couple of times to let us know how horrible it was for her. She was elderly and on oxygen. So then we moved the smokers down the street. When she passed away, some people said, hey, we could go back to smoking on the patio. Immediately there was a huge uproar both from non-smokers and smokers alike. We voted to prohibit smoking at SMYRC altogether. We finally saw this as a really big issue, not just for the smokers, but for our neighbors, ourselves and even our space itself. **Many of those smokers realized the impact that it was having, not just on their lives, but also on the lives of the people around them.** Ever since there has been no smoking at SMYRC, and the policy has held despite staff and location changes

**KITTY:** A great example of how policies get changed for the better! Since you were the Reluctant Recruit to the tobacco movement, how did you keep getting more deeply involved?

**ERNESTO:** Breathe Free got me attending a couple of workshops and talking about why young people smoke or don't smoke. As a non-smoker, I began looking at what resiliencies I had in my life to keep me from smoking. Through that work I got in contact with the Network for LGBT Tobacco Control, which allowed me to see things in a bigger picture. I originally got involved just because I thought it would be a great opportunity to get to travel to this one Summit. That year it was in Minneapolis, at the National Conference on Tobacco Or Health (NCTOH).

Specifically, R.E. Szego (former program director at Breathe Free) said, "I'm going to the (NCTOH) Conference, and I would love to bring you. I just feel your voice is important." So I

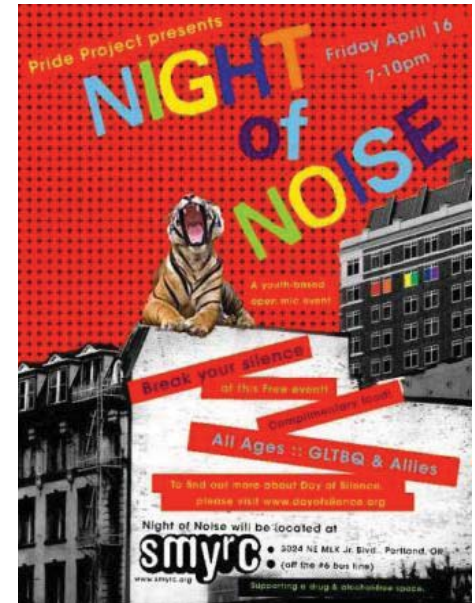
joined this committee, thinking, "I'll get a trip to Minneapolis!" I had never traveled outside the Northwest. I thought, "I'm going to be eating like a champ, and sleeping in a hotel bed." That was initially my incentive: the trip itself! So I agreed to do all these calls for an hour a day, twice a month. I wasn't told, "You have to do these specific things," but instead was asked, "What are you capable of doing? And if you do those things, we'll take you." **So I was allowed to create my own boundaries and say what I needed to get out of this.**

**KITTY:** Setting your own parameters for how deeply involved you were was important to you. What was it like for you to join the youth committee to plan the conference?

**ERNESTO:** When I started getting on these committee calls I was so lost, people were throwing out acronyms left and right! And I felt really dumb and disempowered, until I learned I had joined the regular Network calls, not the youth-specific ones.

So R.E. sat with me a few times and helped me with the acronyms. Then I got onto the youth subcommittee calls, and I felt more comfortable with other young people asking those same questions. Finally we created a workshop called "How gay is this ad?" It looked at how tobacco companies, and many companies in general, target the LGBT communities. This was when I realized I was "doing tobacco work." Up until this point, I still thought I was involved in SMYRC because it was about gay youth. At NCTOH, the workshop piece that I did was a blast and people gave so much **positive feedback!** I really got so much good energy from it. I went to a couple of other youth workshops where other young people presented, and they too were fantastic. **For the first time, actually, I felt like my voice was important.**

**KITTY:** That first year you served on the youth committee at the Summit, and it seemed to define you more as an advocate. How did you continue to grow in your peer leadership efforts?



SMYRC serves more than 1,000 LGBTQ youth each year, reducing high-risk behaviors, and creating opportunities for personal development, community building, and social advocacy. The supportive environment it creates is not just helpful, it's necessary.

**ERNESTO:** The next year I jumped at the opportunity of being on the committee. But after the second year, I feel I've done this and now I want to be more involved. I want to talk about programming, the workshops and the speakers. I also want to talk about how young people can have not just their own side pet projects, but how young people can be integral in the planning, the oversight, and everything for the larger conference. After all, we have a lot of fun. We bring the fun. I've noticed that the more young people there are, the more fun not just some people have, but anyone can have.

Tobacco prevention work is not always that exciting, so it has to be fun. We don't need the heavy emphasis on "don't - you'll kill your cat," or, "it's really, really bad for you," none of that. Instead, it's changing what you can't do, into what you can do.

**KITTY:** As a young person, you knew to build in some fun to all of the work on tobacco so others could become as engaged as you?

**ERNESTO:** Yes, the fun activities are so much of the draw, and we all learn from them as well. An example of this came during National Health Week when SMYRC had events on emotional and physical health, even including things like pedicures and massages! We started a jogging group for the whole week, where you dress up in 1980's jogging outfits and run together each day. Everyone wanted to be a part of it! But the smokers had to quit for the week just because they wanted to run and couldn't, because they couldn't breathe. **So it was not what you can't do, but what you can do** – can you run and still be a smoker? It's all about allowing us to figure it out for ourselves, instead of adults telling us, and about building the fun into everything we do.

**KITTY:** It's really all about the smoker recognizing their own power to quit, just as youth can recognize the power to become a leader. Tell me how you will continue to mentor new young people and bring them to the Summit or engage them in the tobacco control work.

**ERNESTO:** As a community we need to realize that if they're not mentored, young people won't be there to take on roles in anti-tobacco and health movements. **Youth empowerment isn't something that you can just give someone. You have to create a space that's empowering, and then allow**

**the young person to self-select whether they want to be a part of the process.**

There will always be some challenges in bringing young people to a conference for the first time. One of the things I encountered was figuring out the reimbursement pay – how would I cover my food and expenses before being reimbursed. So organizations just need to consider youth-specific barriers and work out solutions.

On the next round of committees, when a new young person joins, I know that I can work in the background to support them. I can offer to explain things after a call, or discover where their strength lies and allow them to do the tasks they are comfortable with. I would say, "I'm going to tell you, this is one of the most amazing things I've ever done. It will be rewarding, and it is hard but you can count on me for anything you need, because I really want you to shine." These are the messages we need to give young people.

**KITTY:** **Listening, supporting, and recognizing youth-specific barriers to participation are critical** then. But so is offering the opportunity for risk-taking and having young voices heard: these are the roles for adults?

**ERNESTO:** Absolutely, and a young person is going to see if you're not sincere. Sincerity is a huge issue, and even if you've never worked with young people, if you are sincere, it will work out. Everyone, the youth and the adults, need to be open to make mistakes, because everyone will make them. As more and more years went by, more adults in the Network understood how to work with us, so I then knew that I could count on them for anything. I wouldn't be here today if an adult hadn't said to me "your voice is important. We value your voice. We need you." I think that's key to any work you're doing: to tell that to a young person, and believe it.

## OUR TOP 10 OUT OF SMYRC'S "15 WAYS TO CREATE SAFE SPACES FOR LGBTQ-IDENTIFIED PEOPLE!"

- Use passive advertising. Create a welcoming environment using literature & inclusive intake forms which communicate that your location is a safe space.
- Encourage your schools and offices to create gender-neutral bathroom options. Understand that this is a health & safety issue for gender non-conforming folks (no matter how they identify.)
- Do not make assumptions regarding sexual orientation or gender identity.
- Do your own homework! Educate yourself about LGBTQ friendly resources in your community. Don't depend on LGBTQ individuals to educate you.
- Listen to LGBTQ voices and become familiar with the culture. Seek out media created by and for LGBTQ folks!
- Allow people to process their gender identities & sexual orientation at their own pace; allow for flexibility in identity, even if it is confusing to you.
- Use appropriate language through listening to your friend/client/student describing their sexual orientation/gender identity their own words.
- If someone comes out to you, help them identify other safe people to come out to.
- Don't "out" people. Allow people to come out at their own pace.
- When referring, do a "warm hand-off": call first to confirm the referral site is a safe space for LGBTQ identified people.

*For the rest of the safe spaces tips, or information about SMYRC, please visit: [www.smyrc.org](http://www.smyrc.org)*

## LESSONS LEARNED

### STEPS TO MAKE YOUR ORGANIZATION OR LGBT TOBACCO EFFORT YOUTH-FRIENDLY AND FOSTER YOUTH LEADERSHIP

- Provide safety, ownership, comfort in decision-making and self-management
- Being heard is critical: allow room for young people's voices
- Put the soapbox down and ask them to step up onto it; encourage them to speak out
- Recognize the learning process on both sides: adult and youth
- Build fun into the activities
- Engage individuals broadly in the group before topic-specific work begins
- Ask, Value, Listen, and Be Sincere

We hope Ernesto's own experiences as a youth leader remind us all of the key ingredients to support youth participation in public health initiatives.

*Interview done by  
Kitty Jerome,  
Public Health Policy Consultant.  
Contact: [kjerome@mac.com](mailto:kjerome@mac.com)*