

## *Youth Pride, INC: Serving a Visible Community*

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How do feminism and service learning intersect in a transformative way for both student and community? The University of Rhode Island's Gender and Women's Studies course, Feminist Thought into Action, challenges its students to answer this question through a synthesis of the pedagogical aims of feminism and service learning carried out in a course project. The semester-long service project asks students to employ a practical application of their knowledge of feminist theory through activism and service in the community. More specifically, the students in the class are asked to choose an organization and, through observation and interaction, evaluate its status as feminist over the course of the semester in order to better gauge the effectiveness of feminist methodologies. I chose to focus my project on Youth Pride, INC, a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning youth center in Providence, Rhode Island.

Before choosing an organization and beginning my investigation, I first had to define my key concepts. It was important to understand how I would define feminism, feminist organizations, and service learning in order to proceed with the project. Only after defining these terms would I have the ability to contextualize their intersection and evaluate my results in order to illuminate the effectiveness of feminist praxis.

I began by defining feminism. With many working definitions, feminism is a fluid concept. bell hooks (2000) states, "Simply put, feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexual exploitation, and oppression" (34). From this simple definition, many others have blossomed. The Feminist Thought into Action course challenged me as a student and thinker to explore these many different definitions and ideas regarding feminism. For example, in her essay, "Challenge of Success: Stages of Growth in Feminist Organizations," Stephanie Riger (1994) argues, "Feminism is not a unitary set of beliefs but instead encompasses a range of ideologies" (275). In addition, Patricia Yancey Martin (1990), in her article, "Rethinking Feminist Organizations," states, "Feminism is a broad, multifaceted, political orientation rather than a single ideology" (184). In this sense, feminism is a broad system of beliefs. Arguably its main tenet, however, is to eliminate "system[s] of dominance of superiors over subordinates" (Riger 1994, 275). While this goal is classically associated with women, feminism seeks to eliminate oppression and oppressive systems for all persons othered by patriarchal society. Patriarchal society privileges white, wealthy, heterosexual males. People who fall outside of this matrix are deemed the "other." In terms of my project, I chose to investigate a specific group oppressed by patriarchy: the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQQ) community.

More specifically, I chose to target the LGBTQQ youth community. With teen suicides heavily publicized in the media and "It Gets Better" campaigns broadcast throughout the country, the presence of LGBTQQ youth is undeniably felt throughout the United States and around the world. In particular, adolescence is a critical time in the life of any member of the LGBTQQ community. It is the time when one is discovering his or her sexuality and questioning his or her orientation. This is an extremely confusing and difficult time for any young person. Added to this deeply personal struggle, are the judgments and attitudes of the community and larger society. LGBTQQ youth are bombarded with conflicting messages. On one hand, a

growing number of tolerant, open-minded people offer words of support and acceptance, while on the other hand many still debase the LGBTQQ community as immoral and inherently wrong. I wished to focus my investigation and service on an organization that, like me, is dedicated to advocating for LGBTQQ youth.

With a working definition of feminism, as well as a specific group targeted for investigation, I next defined the concept of a feminist organization. Martin states, "I suggest that an organization is feminist if it meets any one of the following criteria: (a) has feminist ideology; (b) has feminist guiding values; (c) has feminist goals; (d) produces feminist outcomes; (e) was founded during the women's movement as part of the women's movement" (Martin 1990, 185). Breaking this definition down further, I wanted to focus on an organization that would meet the first four criteria of Martin's definition. I believed these criteria to be the most essential to a truly feminist organization as feminism is a continuous movement rather than a point fixed in time. I needed to find an organization whose guiding ideology, or "rationale for [its] existence, mission, and range of activities and concerns" (Martin 1990, 191), is primarily feminist. Martin defines a feminist ideology as one that "acknowledges that women are oppressed and disadvantaged as a group" and their oppression is "rooted in social arrangements" (191). Although this definition specifically addresses women, it does not fail to account for othered populations in addition to women. In fact, Martin states that feminist ideology is "strongly allied with other social movements," citing the creation of "a just and fair society for all people regardless of sex, race, class, sexual politics, or any other social characteristic" as its primary goal (191-192). This inclusion speaks to my assertion that feminism is far beyond consideration solely for women and has embraced the movement for equality for all. In addition to this guiding ideology, the organization would focus on feminist values. As defined by Martin, feminist values "focus on the primacy of interpersonal relationships; empowerment and personal development of members; building of self-esteem; the promotion of enhanced knowledge, skills, and political awareness; personal autonomy; and the politics of gender" (192). In essence, feminist values and feminist ideology work together so that valuing interpersonal relationships informs the ideological aims of feminism. In addition, feminist goals are "action agendas" (Martin 1990, 193) that focus on change in the individual organization member, general service through education or community involvement, and/or societal change. Feminist outcomes are the "consequences" of the organization's actions on its members, the larger community, and society as a whole.

With these definitions in mind, I chose to research the nonprofit organization Youth Pride, INC (YPI) for my project. YPI is a nonprofit organization in Providence, RI, that offers support, education, and service to LGBTQQ youth in the community. The organization seeks to educate and bolster LGBTQQ youth, teaching them that all people deserve respect, dignity, and equality regardless of who they are or whom they love, while advocating for change in a discriminatory world. The mission of Youth Pride, INC is "to meet the social, emotional and educational needs of LGBTQQ youth and their allies through empowering programs of support, education, organizing and advocacy, while working to change the homophobic, biphobic and transphobic environments in which they live" (YPI 2012). With these long-term goals in mind, Youth Pride, INC has been empowering youth, creating a strong and vocal community, fighting against prejudice and discrimination, and changing the lives of countless young people for the past twenty years. The history of this organization is as rich and vivid as its current strong and forceful presence.

Similar to many institutions dedicated to change, Youth Pride, INC was born out of necessity. In 1992, the idea that would blossom into Youth Pride, INC came out of a meeting

between the Executive Directors of the Samaritans and the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA). Samaritan Director Tony Maione remarked on the organization's inability to aid the LGBTQ youth who called into the Samaritan's suicide prevention hotline in crisis. YWCA Director Maggie Smith suggested the YWCA had the means and motivation to find a solution for the as yet unmet needs of the LGBTQ teens in crisis. She discussed options for supporting the needs of the LGBTQ youth with YWCA staff member Wendy Becker who was immediately on board with the idea of forming a separate organization that would deal solely with the needs of the LGBTQ youth community. Becker, with the encouragement and support of the community, formed a weekly support group for LGBTQ youth called "The Way Out," later renamed YPI as its scope increased, which was founded in 1993 at Brown University's Sarah Doyle Women's Center. Over the next twenty years, Youth Pride, INC has continued to grow and flourish, fighting for change and supporting an underrepresented community.

Before formally investigating YPI for my project, I had to define the final component of the project: service learning. Like feminism, the concept of service learning is one that has been highly contested and widely defined. In his article, "Service Learning: A Balanced Approach to Experiential Education," Andrew Furco (1996) attests to this conflicted definition, stating that service learning is used to classify "a wide array of experiential endeavors, from volunteer and community service projects to field studies and internship programs" (71). He goes on to say that service learning is viewed as "a new term that reveals a rich, innovative, pedagogical approach for more effective teaching" as well as "another term for well-established experiential education programs" (Furco 1996, 71). As was the case with feminism, it is up to me to restrict the parameters of service learning's definition in order to best suit the purpose of my project. While Furco exposes the dichotomy of service learning's definition, the Corporation for National and Community Service provides a clear definition of its core principles. Despite the disputes over the origins of service learning, this definition is used across the board. In his article "Service-Learning: A Balanced Approach to Experiential Education", Andrew Furco shares The Corporation for National and Community Service's definition of service learning:

a method under which students learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service experiences that meet actual community needs, that [are] integrated into the students' academic curriculum or provide structured time for [reflection, and] that enhance what is taught in school by extending student learning beyond the classroom and into the community. (1996)

My Feminist Thought into Action course operated using this definition in the sense that our learning went beyond the classroom. We were expected to actively participate in our education through outreach in the community. One method of ensuring this high level of engagement was the course project. Evaluating an organization's status as feminist would involve not only research and observation but also participation. We were asked to spend at least eight hours with our chosen organization volunteering alongside its participants. Our involvement with the organization would enhance our understanding of its ideology, values, goals, and outcomes. It would, in turn, lend further credibility to our conclusions regarding its feminist status.

With my concepts defined and an organization chosen, I began my service-learning project with YPI in order to evaluate its status as feminist. I would spend time observing and participating in the daily activities of Youth Pride, INC's headquarters in Providence, RI. Through this observation and participation, I'd be able to complete my evaluation. Moreover, I'd be able to apply my working definitions of the aforementioned concepts and evaluate their intersection at YPI. I began by visiting YPI on a Thursday to interview a YPI member about his

experience with the organization as well as to observe and participate in the scheduled activities of the day, including a support group session. Thursdays are notoriously busy days for YPI. After school lets out, teens from around the state gather there to unwind and connect with friends. For many of them, it is the only time of the day that they are allowed to be themselves. As a result, the energy in the building is electric. No fewer than ten kids welcomed me warmly as a newcomer to their sacred space as soon as I walked in. When they learned that I was not, in fact, a new YPI member, but a student conducting a project, they were more than willing to sing the praises of an organization that for many has been life saving and for all has been a wholly positive transformative experience. As Thursday nights contain the weekly “Way Out” support group meetings, their time was limited. A twenty-one-year-old male volunteer, however, graciously agreed to talk with me and then invited me to join their support group so I could get a better feeling for what Youth Pride, INC is all about.

The volunteer, John<sup>1</sup>, has been a member of Youth Pride, INC since he was 15 years old. After such a long commitment, it goes without saying that YPI “means lot to [him].” For John, Youth Pride, INC came into his life at a time when he felt the most hopeless. John elaborates on this serendipitous timing, stating, “Before [YPI], I was going through a rough time in high school. I didn’t know that many LGBTQQ people. Once I came here I was like ‘Oh, this is cool.’” Youth Pride, INC offered John a “cool” place where he was understood, supported, and loved; at a time in his life when he was feeling none of those things, that offer was, and remains, precious. For John, Youth Pride, INC is an environment so rare in our society: one free of discrimination and hate. YPI promotes love, tolerance, and acceptance. John calls it a “support system for those who don’t have any support at home or in their community.” This support system becomes something akin to a family. At the very least, it creates a tight-knit group of friends. John himself “met most of [his] friends here.” This is one of the winning aspects of the kind of service the organization provides; it fosters community and solidarity, providing emotional support for a group of people often in desperate need of it. It’s a place where kids won’t feel “quite as alone,” according to John.

Not only are the kids in the organization responsible for this solidarity but also the LGBTQQ and allied supporters in the greater community rally to Youth Pride, INC to support the cause. For example, at the Seventh Gay-Straight Alliance Leadership Coalition that took place on March 24, 2012, I got the opportunity to speak with members of the community who are as passionate as YPI about helping youth like John. For example, Frank Toti, writer and director, and Steven Pennell, Coordinator of the Arts and Culture Program at the University of Rhode Island’s Feinstein campus, collaborated on a project called “The Journey Out.” “The Journey Out” is a new play by Toti, which brings to light the history of the older LGBTQQ community in Rhode Island through oral testimonies. The project began in the summer of 2010 with fifty interviews that developed into fourteen characters. Toti and Pennell wanted to highlight “how things have changed [for the LGBTQQ community] and how they have stayed the same.” The project is a platform for “creating social change” that is now touring high schools. This project is an excellent example of the type of service learning that YPI engages in. Many members of the organization are involved in the project and the entire organization fully supports the endeavor. The first stop on the play’s tour was a performance for YPI at its annual GSA Leadership Coalition to thank the organization for its support as well as provide a service to its members. Toti believes YPI is a vital audience for “The Journey Out.” He wanted to show

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<sup>1</sup> Name has been changed for privacy

them “it gets better, but [you need to] make it better.” “The Journey Out” deals with self-awareness of gender identity and sexual orientation, coming out, AIDS, bullying, and religion, among other topics. Youth Pride, INC strongly believes its youth should be educated on these issues. It also welcomes the opportunity for the older LGBTQQ community to come out and support its youth. It is a way to ground the kids in tradition and link them to a future beyond that which they can imagine. Pennell calls it a means for “young people [to] look back and say, ‘these are our [spiritual] ancestors. This is who they were.’” Projects like “The Journey Out” are indicative of the type of service provided by YPI. YPI provides the material necessary for its participants to be educated on their place in the world, but it is through the efforts of men like Toti that they are shown the impact of that education.

As John leads me into the “Way Out” support group meeting in the conference room, where twenty boisterous kids laugh and joke, sharing stories from their week, it’s clear that YPI’s efforts have not been in vain. I was able to enjoy an hour of peace and acceptance with the Youth Pride, INC members thanks to the organization’s tireless efforts. These efforts do not end when the kids return home for the night, however. Youth Pride, INC continues to work diligently for the youth it supports long after they’ve gone home. The staff works full-time organizing opportunities, creating programs, and providing information and scholarship funding for its youth participants. As an organization, YPI understands that its dedication to service and its pursuit of feminist ideals will help bring about the social change it seeks to make.

In order to draw larger conclusions regarding these goals as well as the intersection of feminism and service learning, it is necessary to understand the mission of Youth Pride, INC. As an organization dedicated to bettering the lives of LGBTQQ youth in Rhode Island, YPI has adopted the tagline, “don’t grow up invisible.” The organization makes it its mission to meet the needs of the youth and seek to rectify oppressive environments they face so these youth grow up visible, while at the same time providing an environment that promotes love and acceptance. This mission of support, empowerment, and social change earns YPI a categorization as a feminist organization. In addition, it affirms its status as a service learning organization. It aligns with the definition of a feminist organization provided by Patricia Yancey Martin in “Rethinking Feminist Organizations.” What Martin categorizes as “feminist goals” and “feminist outcomes” are interwoven in YPI’s service learning pedagogical aims. Youth Pride, INC, as indicated by its mission statement, adheres not to one but to several of Martin’s criteria, situating itself firmly in both feminist and service learning arenas.

Youth Pride, INC’s mission statement can be broken down into three parts for further analysis. The first part is its affirmation to “meet the social, emotional and educational needs” of LGBTQQ youth. This statement targets a minority group that feminism recognizes as discriminated against and oppressed by a heteronormative patriarchal society. Feminism is concerned with the elimination of sexism; however, it is not a single-minded ideology concerned only with women and their plight. As defined by Martin, feminist ideology seeks to eliminate discrimination and oppression for all affected by the matrix of oppression facing women. This includes those who are discriminated against because of their gender, race, class, and sexual orientation. Martin suggests that this “inferior” position in society is, “shaped by processes of structural inequality, not individual actions or circumstances” (Martin 1990, 184). YPI’s targeted demographic of LGBTQQ youth falls under the blanket of a feminist ideology. By seeking to meet the “social, emotional, and educational needs” of the LGBTQQ youth, YPI is working internally to improve the lives of this oppressed group at both the systemic and individual levels.

The second part of Youth Pride, INC's mission statement exemplifies how it will better the lives of these youth and their allies through "empowering programs of support, education, organizing and advocacy." These service programs are working towards a feminist goal through their transformative nature, in the same way that service learning seeks to transform through experiential education. Martin states "feminism is transformational because it involves a vision of society that does not exist and sees social, political, and economic change as necessary for that vision to be realized" (184). By developing and facilitating these transformative programs, YPI is working towards its feminist goals of creating change in the lives of LGBTQQ youth by envisioning and creating a society free of discrimination and prejudice, in which all are truly afforded equality.

These internal goals are coupled with the goal of "chang[ing] the homophobic, biphobic and transphobic environments in which [LGBTQQ youth] live" (YPI 2012). This goal further pursues YPI's feminist goal of creating social and political change using service-learning techniques. While the immediate goal of improving the lives of LGBTQQ youth is important, the long-term goal of eliminating the social inequalities and discriminatory systems that oppress them is pivotal. Youth Pride, INC goes further addressing this vision, stating, "the future we strive to create is one in which prejudice against LGBTQQ youth and their allies has been eliminated, and LGBTQQ youth, young adults and their allies are empowered to live healthy, full lives" (YPI 2012). While working towards this future, YPI's mission is to establish a strong and vocal community of LGBTQQ youth and their allies to "be heard, accepted and nurtured" (YPI 2012). These goals, both long- and short-term, are clearly feminist and, when carried out, will create feminist outcomes as well as fulfill a service-learning role.

In addition to following a feminist ideology, having feminist goals, and producing feminist outcomes indicative of service-learning pedagogies, YPI and its mission are guided by strong feminist values. Youth Pride, INC clearly articulates these values in the following:

YPI recognizes the essential nature of youth-driven programs that combine elements of advocacy, support and empowerment. We understand the importance of empowering young people to make change and the necessity of supporting them in doing so. To that end, YPI sees youth development, leadership and organizing as fundamental elements to successful youth work. YPI encourages young people to be leaders within the organization and community, and develops programming to facilitate this process. (YPI 2012)

Youth Pride, INC is dedicated not only to assisting youth in creating change but also to empowering them to create change themselves, creating a new generation of service learners. This necessity to develop leaders evokes the Do-It-Yourself mentality of Second Wave feminists. If LGBTQQ youth are seeking to change the world they live in, then they must change the world on their own. YPI provides youth with the tools, support, and environment to change their world. This sense of ownership bolsters the success and confidence of a marginalized group who are constantly told they are immoral and out of place. By placing the power and control in the hands of the youth affected, YPI exhibits clear feminist values that will be invaluable in their quest for social and political equality for the LGBTQQ community. By relinquishing ownership to the participants of YPI, the organization clearly demonstrates feminist and service learning ideals. Both pedagogies encourage students to claim their education through real world experience and application.

Moreover, behind the ambitious and necessary activism for social justice and human rights and advocacy work of Youth Pride, INC is the pivotal goal of cultivating youth leadership

through service. It seeks to move its education beyond the confines of the organization to encourage and foster practical service education for its members in order to train them as leaders in the community. This objective exemplifies YPI's synthesis of feminism and service learning. Since YPI's birth, the youth participants have been instrumental in all decision-making for the organization. From its name to its programs, the youth participants are empowered to create their own change and are given the means by which to do so through the collectivist nature of the organization in which the youth are as instrumental in decision-making as the adults. The responsibility afforded to these young people by Youth Pride, INC empowers them to transform their community. In this sense, YPI synthesizes two major tenets of feminism and service learning. It encourages its participants to fight for the equality and transformative social vision feminism promotes through active service in community programs and outreach. It teaches them that a visible presence in the community is pivotal to creating change. With the formal feminist instruction provided by YPI, its participants are well prepared and encouraged to engage in the community through service.

The mission statement of Youth Pride, INC and its further extrapolated vision and values strongly mark it as a feminist service learning organization. Youth Pride, INC targets a specific group within the feminist movement, the LGBTQQ community, and offers it support and acceptance while proposing solutions and change through service. In its pursuit of social, political, and economic equality for all marginalized groups affected by the matrix of oppression, the feminist movement and service learning find a great ally in Youth Pride, INC, whose members are working towards equality through action every day.

In conclusion, my time with Youth Pride, INC introduced me to a feminist organization dedicated to serving and improving the lives of LGBTQQ youth and the community they live in through community service and outreach. Moreover, it introduced me to a service learning organization that actively teaches its participants to be their own agents for change through service, activism, and advocacy. YPI is working on both individual and systemic levels to eliminate LGBTQQ oppression in the community, as well as partnering with and advocating for organizations working on a national level to achieve the same change. Applying service learning through a feminist lens, YPI educates on the systemic level and encourages active service on the individual level. Youth Pride, INC works in a larger context to change laws and opinions, while at the same time, making the day-to-day lives of LGBTQQ youth better. The duality of its purpose, and the extent to which it works to achieve these goals, firmly situate YPI as one of the leading feminist and service learning organizations in the community.

In every endeavor, YPI embodies its mission and carries out its goals. From its political advocacy at the institutional level supporting LGBTQQ bills and causes to its humanistic goals providing weekly support groups for LGBTQQ youth in the community, YPI consistently serves its target community by combining counseling and other types of support to individuals with a strong feminist political vision. At the forefront of every decision are the needs of LGBTQQ youth and making the world a better place for them. In a national climate where the LGBTQQ community still faces dehumanizing prejudice and discrimination, it is more important than ever that organizations like YPI are visibly advocating for the rights of this minority group. By utilizing the principles of both feminism and service learning, YPI has created an innovative and highly effective method for carrying out its mission, thus showcasing the positive effects of a synthesis of feminism and service learning.

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