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## You've just crossed over into... the Queer Zone

By Mark | October 27, 2011

It's nice to be reminded on occasion that, in spite of all the bad shit going on in the world, there are still incredible people doing good things all around us, trying to make life better for people who are desperate, confused, scared, hungry, etc. I had the occasion to speak with one of those people a few days ago. Here's our interview.



**MARK:** What's your name, what do you do, and do you live in Ypsi?

**QUINN:** My name is Quinn Phillips. I'm a youth specialist at [Ozone House Youth and Family Services](#), a non-profit which serves homeless and at-risk youth in Washtenaw County. I've lived in Ypsilanti since I started at EMU in 2006. I stuck around after graduation because I absolutely love this town! Where else can queer hipsters in zombie make-up hold hands in public and not be looked at strangely?

**MARK:** I understand that I live not too far from a designated Queer Zone. Can you tell me what exactly this means? Is my family in danger?

**QUINN:** I'm a co-facilitator of [Queer Zone](#), a support group for LGBTQ and questioning youth ages 13-20 at the Ozone House Youth Drop-In Center (on Hamilton St. a block from the Ypsilanti Transit Center). We meet every Friday night from 6:30pm-8:30pm.

**MARK:** Let's say that I was a gay teenager, growing up in Ypsi. Why would I want to go to the Queer Zone? And what would I find there?

**QUINN:** First, the Ozone House Drop-In Center is a great place for any teen to hang out on weeknights from 4pm-8pm. It's a very welcoming space for youth to meet new people, get a free meal, check Facebook, do something creative, and know they are safe and supported. All our services are free and confidential.

People come to Queer Zone for fun, food and a sense of community. It's so refreshing to walk into a place where everyone identifies as LGBTQ, even the staff. We do have nights open to straight allies, but usually our group is for queer and questioning youth

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only. This ensures that youth feel safe. Many youth in this area are not able to be "out" at home or with friends. This is a place they can come and really be themselves without fear of rejection or violence.

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We talk about issues that are important to queer youth and give folks a chance to be heard. Equally as important, we spend time relaxing, dancing, making art, watching movies and forgetting for a minute that society considers us "different". Did I mention free food? The fabulous Bee Mayhew has been hand-delivering delicious soup from Beezy's Cafe for us to enjoy free of charge. What more could you ask for? Check us out our Facebook page [here](#).

**MARK:** What are the biggest issues facing LGBTQ teens today in Washtenaw County right now?

**QUINN:** Homelessness among queer youth is a huge problem. 40% of homeless teens identify as LGBTQ. LGBTQ youth are also at much greater risk for suicide, substance abuse and mental health problems due to the discrimination, rejection and violence they face. Ozone House has a [24 hour crisis line](#), emergency youth shelter and counseling program for youth facing these and other issues.

Many of the young people we serve at Queer Zone are youth of color from lower-income families. These kids have to deal with racism, classism and homophobia from their peers at a time when they are just trying to fit in and figure out who they are. They are often less likely to have families that are accepting of queer identities than white middle-class youth. Finally, the epidemic of anti-gay bullying has been getting a lot of deserved attention lately, but Michigan schools are still not safe places for queer youth.

**MARK:** I have a friend that serves on the Ozone board, and he was telling me that you've recently lost funding for some of your Ypsi programs. There was one in particular that he noted. I believe it had to do with hiring teens to do outreach in the local community, identifying at-risk students, and making sure they got the care they needed. Am I remembering that correctly?

**QUINN:** Yes. You are referring to the Street Outreach program at the Ozone House Drop-In Center. It's an incredible program where we employ local youth to do outreach about our services to their peers at the places they hang out. These Peer Outreach Workers can build trust with other at-risk youth in a way that adults can't, so it is our most effective way to spread the word about the work we do.

Each fall we have scores of kids apply to be a Peer Outreach Worker. It's a great first job for many teens. We help them develop skills they need to be successful in the work force and to improve interpersonal relationships. It is amazing to watch them transform into young adults over the course of a year. When they graduate from the program, youth often tell us, very emotionally, how much their lives have changed for the better from having the consistent support that Ozone House provides.

This year we did not receive the funding for this program, which we had been awarded annually since 1999. Social service agencies all across the state are being asked to do more with less money in recent years. Ozone House has been named one of best-managed non-profits in south-east Michigan, and we are certainly working hard to ensure we do not have to cut any programming.

We have always counted on local support for our programs, and this year it is more important than ever. There are a lot of ways community members can help out.

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**MARK:** I hear you've got a benefit coming up soon. Can you tell us a little about it?

**QUINN:** Absolutely! The second annual "Kicked Out the Jams!" benefit concert will be raising money for LGBTQ youth at-risk of homelessness on Friday November, 18th at Necto. It will feature performances by Nervous but Excited, Bitch (an Ypsi native, formerly from the duo Bitch and Animal) and other fabulously queer local guests. The cover is \$10 with student ID and \$15 for general admission (ages 18+). Necto is giving us exclusive access to their venue from 6:30pm to 10pm, so even folks who shy away from clubs will enjoy the atmosphere. Just ask anyone who attended last year's "Kicked Out the Jams" at the Corner Brewery! We raised over \$4000 for local youth and had an amazing time.



100% of the proceeds of this event will benefit Ozone House's "Kicked Out" fund, for which this benefit is named. The fund was started by Homofactus Press, local publishers of the "Kicked Out" anthology of stories by LGBTQ youth who are "kicked out" of their homes for being queer. The proceeds will be used for our Queer Zone program and 24 hour crisis line, which gives local youth access to help any time day or night.

**MARK:** One last question.... Just so I'm clear, I suspect that the fundraiser is open to straight folks, is that correct?

**QUINN:** "Kicked Out the Jams" is open to everyone ages 18 and older. Last year we had attendees of just about every sexual orientation and gender identity, including many straight allies. This year will be no less diverse. If you want to support the cause, but can't make it to the event [click here](#) for information on how to support the "Kicked Out" fund.

And, now that I'm posting this, I realize that I forgot to ask my big "gotcha" question about how, after they fatten these kids up on free soup, they use Satanism to turn them gay. I guess that will have to wait until next time... In the meantime, please consider making a donation to Ozone House.

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