

Rainbow Project

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“I feel I haven’t been able to be myself since this began.”

This is the hard to hear lockdown experience of one young person, who’s part of the Rainbow Project’s ‘Out North West’ programme. And it is truth like this that galvanizes those who head up the project to keep reaching out to those feeling isolated, as they struggle without some of the support they had come to depend on.

“Many of the young people are out at home – but don’t talk about their identities there,” explains Colleen O’Neill, a youth worker with Rainbow.

“Often the biggest thing that connects the young people is the space in our centre – they can be themselves there, they don’t feel they have to adapt their behaviours, they can just breathe easy...”

Obviously in lockdown times, their centre was shut and drop-in services were transferred online within one week. But the loss of that space was a concern and a challenge for staff and young people.

“For some, the fear is if they’re at home and chatting online someone will hear,” explains Colleen, “So it doesn’t have the same confidentiality for them.”

But the group was creative in its approach to opening up online spaces. A Taiko drumming group, that has been running for 3 years, proved a great way to keep young people connected.

“It’s a young LGBT friendly group about owning your space and your voice - and just expressing yourself,” says Colleen.

Weekly classes were held online and there were sessions with leading players from around the world. While they may have missed the face to face contact, Colleen says it showed the spirit of the young people - who created their own home-made drums and kept showing up.

It’s been a testing time for many young people, cut off from their support networks – and Rainbow do report a significant increase in the numbers making contact with their counselling service.

“It’s been hard for young people, managing their mental health, while being mostly within family settings,” Colleen says. “I can jump in the car or go a walk when I’m struggling – they’re dependent on their parents. Energy and motivation can be low for them.”

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An added complexity for trans people during lockdown was high profile comments made by JK Rowling. Colleen says she witnessed these having a direct impact on some of their young people.

“It was heart-breaking to see. The world of Harry Potter has been a safe haven to many young people and it was as if that came crashing down for young trans people. It’s been a tough time.”

To combat some of the challenges, music and art became important avenues of expression and solace for the Out North West group. These were facilitated by the young people who performed on Zoom sessions.

“Signing in to zoom to chat can get stagnant,” laughs Colleen. “But what was great was that the young people were showcasing their talents to each other and there is a vulnerability in that; to say here’s what I know, here’s what I do, please treat me with kindness. And they are just so kind to each other. Those who facilitated have come away with new confidence. It’s been gorgeous.”

The group also set up its own discord server, designed usually for gamers. They created channels focussed around cooking, arts, movies and mental health people. Over 50 young people signed up and Colleen celebrates the fact it brought some together outside their usual friendship groups. They also had a Zoom drop in moment from Derry girl Nicola Coughlan, who wanted to show her support to the young people.

For Colleen, there’s been real encouragements but challenges and gaps have been exposed too.

“When you take your services online, geographical boundaries disappear & young people from rural areas, where there is no queer specific support, have been able to connect. We want that to carry on...”

“I grew up in a rural village, it wasn’t until I was in my early 20s I realised there were services for queer people there. And so this opportunity allows us to tackle that lack of infrastructure, to reach some of the most isolated young people. And that’s exciting.”

For Colleen the underlying message that is at the heart of the work they do – is kindness.

“This is a place of love and something has happened in our project during this time, bonds have been strengthened, friendships built up. And we just want to keep this going.”