



The Point Foundation

by Linda Rapp

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The Point Foundation offers financial support, mentoring, and, above all, hope, to college students who have been marginalized because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

The Point Foundation was established in 2001 by life partners Bruce Lindstrom and Carl Strickland, who wanted to create not just a scholarship program but one that would offer mentoring to glbtq students.

Lindstrom knew at first hand the stress and anxiety often felt by students because of their sexual orientation: for fifteen years he was estranged from his evangelical family after coming out as a gay man. "Being alone in your twenties can be difficult," he said. "I always wanted to be involved in helping LGBT youth have an easier transition from youth to adulthood."

Strickland also emphasized the importance of positive experiences: "What Bruce and I envisioned was a community and a family. For some [Point Foundation] scholars, this is their only connection to role models of happy, healthy gay people."

Nancy Cunningham, the executive director of Funders for Lesbian and Gay Issues, lauded the accomplishments of The Point Foundation and acknowledged the painful histories of many of its contributors. "A lot of [glbtq] people who are in their fifties and sixties had traumatic experiences personally," she stated in 2004. "As they were growing up, the world was a different place, with very few role models or support systems. There is a very direct connection for [these] people to give back to young people today, so they can have more resources and support."

Such assistance is especially important because glbtq youth are often coming out at younger ages than in previous generations. While support systems such as gay-straight alliances in high schools have proliferated, considerable problems remain for young people whose families ostracize them because of religious or cultural beliefs.

Seeing gifted students, often also accomplished in other areas such as music or sports, cut off from the emotional and financial support of their families made Lindstrom determined to create an organization so that they would "not go through what I went through."

In a move that bespoke their strong personal commitment to the project, Lindstrom and Strickland named the foundation after their house, The Point, which sits on an outcropping of land overlooking Lake Tahoe in Nevada.

They recruited prosperous gay men and lesbians to serve on the board of trustees. The generous trustees and an anonymous donor underwrite all administrative and fund-raising expenses so that contributions can go entirely to supporting the scholars. A number of other donors have established special scholarships in their own name or in memory of a loved one.

In 2004 Lindstrom and Strickland brought in Vance Lancaster, who had previously been director of strategic giving at the Gill Foundation, as executive director. His experience and expertise in administration took the burden of that task off the trustees.

Lindstrom launched The Point Foundation with an endowment of \$500,000. In the academic year 2002-2003, the first in which scholarships were awarded, eight students received a total of \$114,198. By 2006 the foundation had contributed nearly a million dollars to the educational expenses of its scholars.

Students seeking support from The Point Foundation go through a rigorous application process. In addition to having a record of academic excellence, applicants must demonstrate a commitment to the glbtq community and an awareness of their place within it by writing an essay on "how you feel you have been marginalized because of your sexual orientation."

Finalists for the awards are interviewed by the trustees. The chosen scholars receive generous grants--often "full rides"--for tuition, books and other course supplies, room and board, and living expenses. In exchange, they are expected to continue to achieve high levels of academic performance and also to complete a service project to benefit the glbtq community. The number of applicants has risen steadily and now exceeds five hundred per year.

To contribute to the success of the scholars, each one is paired with at least one mentor in his or her career field. Background checks are done on all prospective mentors.

Mentors not only offer scholars professional guidance but also frequently assist students estranged from their families by providing support in ways such as helping them move into campus dormitories and making them part of holiday celebrations.

Some Point scholars suffer continued rejection by their families, but others manage to improve their relationships as they grow in accomplishment and confidence.

Point scholars are a diverse lot, ranging from students accepted into college at sixteen to graduate students in their thirties. Some have been abandoned by their families and are doing their best to scrape by; others, like Maya Marcel-Keyes, the daughter of anti-gay Republican presidential aspirant Alan Keyes, come from more comfortable circumstances but still need help in pursuing academic and career goals as well as realizing and celebrating their individual identities.

The Point Foundation also offers opportunities for its scholars to meet and share experiences through programs like a 2005 retreat in Traverse City, Michigan, that brought together thirty-eight scholars.

The students who have turned to The Point Foundation are different, yet in a way all the same--gifted people seeking to excel in their chosen professions and who also take pride in being part of the glbtq community.

The Foundation's focus on young people who have suffered because of homophobia may reflect the maturing of the glbtq movement for equality. The movement may have reached the point where its focus can shift slightly to take a longer range perspective. The Point Foundation's program allows philanthropists to explore practical means of supporting a new generation of potential activists and thereby help to insure a fairer future.

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www.thepointfoundation.org

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