



The Trevor Project

by Linda Rapp

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The helpline number for
the Trevor Project.

Among people aged 15 to 24, suicide is the third most common cause of death. The danger is particularly acute for glbtq youth: fear of rejection by their families and churches, feelings of isolation, physical and verbal abuse, and other social pressures bring some to such a point of despair that the rate of suicide attempts by glbtq young people is believed to be approximately three times that by heterosexuals.

To offer help and support to youth in crisis, James Lecense, Peggy Rajski, and Randy Stone launched The Trevor Project in 1998, establishing The Trevor Helpline, a toll-free suicide-prevention telephone counseling service for glbtq young people. The Los Angeles-based educational program has helped youth from all over the United States.

The name of the enterprise came from a film on which the three had collaborated in 1994. The eighteen-minute *Trevor* was based on the fictional story "Dear Diary" from Lecense's one-man show *Word of Mouth*. Rajski directed the feature and co-produced it with Stone.

Set as a sequence of diary entries, the film tells the story of bright, funny, and exuberant thirteen-year-old Trevor (played by Brett Barsky), an avid fan of theater and music who loves lip-synching Diana Ross songs. He is delighted to be befriended by a handsome school athlete, but when he naïvely declares his affection for the other boy, he finds himself ostracized by his schoolmates. His parents, having read his diary, arrange for a priest to counsel him--at a Dairy Queen, of all places--a predictably unproductive course of action. As a consequence of these events, a confused Trevor attempts to "cure" himself of his homosexuality with techniques including improvised electro-shock therapy, which fails, to the surprise of possibly no one except Trevor, who runs away from home.

Reviewer Steven Rosen praised the way that the film "lets Trevor narrate his story in short, humorous vignettes" but warns that "yet, *Trevor's* not light entertainment. It becomes quite heart-rending as this joyful boy, fearful of the way others regard him, begins to consider suicide."

Trevor not only considers suicide but also attempts it, landing in a hospital where he meets Jack, a young volunteer aide, who becomes a friend and mentor, and helps him understand the value of his life. The film ends on an upbeat note with Trevor, newly confident and content, dancing with his previous verve while singing Ross's "I'm Coming Out" as he goes up the sidewalk and back home to his parents' house.

Trevor won numerous honors, including the Academy Award for Best Live Action Short Film in 1994 and was subsequently broadcast, with an introduction by Ellen DeGeneres, on the HBO network several times in August 1998. The film was also combined with three others in the 1997 production *Boys Life 2*.

The license fee from HBO, along with a grant from the Colin Higgins Foundation, allowed Lecesne, Rajski, and Stone to set up the toll-free Trevor Helpline at 866-4.U.TREVOR. It was the first helpline in the United States to offer suicide-prevention and crisis counseling to glbtq youth 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Response to the helpline has shown its importance: as of 2007, over 100,000 phone calls had been received.

The Trevor Helpline counselors are volunteers who receive classroom instruction and then ten hours of supervised training at the West Hollywood call center before handling calls on their own. In addition, the counselors attend in-service training programs three times a year. At least two counselors are always on duty, and The Trevor Project is partnered with the San Francisco Suicide Prevention Center, to which calls are directed if the West Hollywood counselors are already engaged helping other callers.

Speaking in 2006, then executive director Jorge Valencia (who became executive director of the Point Foundation in January 2007) explained that "the majority of calls come in right after school gets out. Gay teens who are harassed, verbally abused, and physically assaulted feel very alone. Knowing that there is someone they can speak with means a lot to them, especially if they are not getting support from family, community, schools, or their religion." The need can be particularly acute for youth in rural areas and other places where there are few agencies or organizations to offer support. Approximately three quarters of the calls to The Trevor Helpline are from people in the central portion of the United States.

The Trevor Project reached teens all over the country in late 2004 when the helpline number and web site address were featured in a seven-second announcement at the end of an episode of the WB network drama series *Jack & Bobby* in which a gay teen character, unable to come to terms with his sexual orientation, committed suicide. Andy Scheer, the program and special events manager at Trevor, reported that 143 calls came in between 11:00 p.m. and 7:00 a.m. the night that the program aired, compared to "about 10 per month during that timeframe" on average.

Scheer also noted that although suicide prevention is central to the mission of The Trevor Project, "gay and questioning youth don't have to be suicidal to call. We are here for youth in crisis, and that crisis is defined by them, not us."

To meet the needs of glbtq young people not facing immediate danger but rather seeking information about sexual orientation and identity, The Trevor Project created an online question-and-answer forum, Dear Trevor. Since the inception of the service in 2005, hundreds of young people from the United States and abroad have been able to write in anonymously for assistance with their questions and concerns.

The Trevor Project expanded its mission to education in 2004 when it produced The Trevor Survival Kit, which includes a copy of *Trevor*, a teaching guide for its presentation, cards with the helpline number, and informational posters. Thousands of educators and youth services providers have received this valuable resource free of charge.

Ryan Tarpley, the assistant head of a private school in southern California where the program has been used regularly in a required course, stated, "It's been a safe way to introduce challenging topics such as suicide, stereotyping, sexuality, and gender roles. This gives us the most supportive and structured format to discuss these issues."

In February 2007 Charles Robbins, previously the director of development of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, joined The Trevor Project as executive director. His announced goals include adding to the infrastructure of the helpline operation, increasing funding, and continuing to raise the visibility of the organization.

One of the recent initiatives of The Trevor Project is a "Don't Erase Your Queer Future" advertising campaign launched during National Suicide Prevention Week (September 9-15, 2007). With banner ads on social networking sites as well as a web site of its own, www.donteraseyourqueerfuture.org, the campaign presents quotations from prominent glbtq people, then slowly erases the words. Among the individuals represented are Walt Whitman, Oscar Wilde, Susan B. Anthony, Bayard Rustin, and Josephine Baker. Viewers

are asked to consider the artistic, cultural, and social contributions that would have been lost if these people had committed suicide.

Through their suicide-prevention helpline and educational programs, the people of The Trevor Project provide invaluable services not only by helping glbtq youth to survive times of intense despair but also by educating them about their identity, their culture, and their community, and by promoting understanding in the wider society so that the young people may have safer, happier, and more satisfying lives.

Befitting its origins, The Trevor Project has benefited from the support of many in the film community, including actors Alan Cumming, Ellen DeGeneres, and Lily Tomlin. In June 2007, Jodie Foster kicked off a fund-raising campaign by making the largest donation in the organization's history.

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The Trevor Project web site: www.thetrevorproject.org

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