

Brookdale Hosts Guest Lecture on Transgender Issues

- October 13th, 2016



Dozens of students, faculty and staff came together in the Student Life Center on Oct. 11 for a special presentation by noted speaker and LGBTQ advocate Seth Rainess.

The talk, held on [National Coming Out Day](#) in the U.S., centered on the challenges encountered by transgender children and adults and the steps community members can take to help address them.

Rainess, a popular workshop leader who serves with the Childrens Hospital of [Philadelphia's Gender and Sexuality Development Clinic](#), the [Jersey Shore PFLAG](#), [GLSEN](#) of Central New Jersey and the [World Professional Association for Transgender Health](#), spoke of his own journey as a transgender male, which included growing up in the 1950's and 60's and spending more than 30 years as a woman before his transition.

After growing up in an era when concepts like homosexuality and gender identity were rarely even discussed – let alone accepted – Rainess said he now has a deep appreciation for the struggles faced by children and young adults who are coming to terms with their own identity.

“People, especially children, can feel trapped in a corner,” said Rainess, who underwent a series of gender corrective surgeries and medical treatments as an adult.

“If they tell their parents, maybe they get kicked out of the house. They feel they have nowhere to turn. Shelters today report that 43 percent of the homeless people they see are LGBT. And 40 percent of all transgender people attempt suicide, compared with 2 percent of the national population. These are big numbers – numbers that can’t be ignored.”



Members of the Brookdale Alliance participate in a guest lecture on transgender issues on Oct. 11.

Those statistics, Rainess said, have roots in a number of societal factors, including the negative stereotypes and systemic discrimination encountered by transgender people of all ages and backgrounds.

Even today, he said, many prominent politicians and governing bodies treat transgender individuals as criminals and deviants, prohibiting them from using certain bathrooms and stoking irrational fears among voters. Other sanctions are more subtle, such as state laws that prevent transgender individuals from **changing their driver’s licenses or birth certificates** unless they elect to have a gender correction operation, which many individuals can’t afford or simply don’t want to undergo.

“Transgender people are not exhibitionists; they are not perverts or pedophiles,” Rainess said. “They are just people who want to live their lives, and who believe they were born in the wrong body. They have the right to a good life. A normal life. So we have to educate people about that...” They are just different, which is kind of cool to me. We’re not all robots. Some people take issue with that, but I find it kind of beautiful.

“Specifically in this country, if you don’t fit into this box or that box, we don’t know what to do with you,” he added, addressing the students in attendance. “It makes us uncomfortable. It’s the way we are brought up. But your generation, people your age, you are changing that. You understand that the idea is to be somebody’s friend and accept them for who they are. You have the opportunity to grow up and create a world that hopefully is going to save my world.”

Marie Boyle, a second-year theater student and member of Brookdale’s [Alliance](#) club, said she was happy to participate in the program and to see an experienced, educated professional like Rainess speak so openly and frankly about LGBTQ issues.



“There is a big gap between the world today and the one he was born into 60-plus years ago,” said Boyle, who identifies as Agender. **“It’s a comfort knowing that there has been progress. And I appreciate being able to hear these things from an adult’s perspective, and seeing so many non-students here today alongside us. Normally when you think of the LGBTQ+ community, you think of it as a youth community, so it was nice to see and hear another side of it.**

“Events like these – and National Coming Out Day – are really important for creating that sense of visibility,” she added. **“It says, simply, that we are here. That every once in a while, it’s safe to come out of hiding. And it encourages people to at least question things internally. It’s those little steps that really count. Today is about telling your stories, and giving those people in hiding, as well as those thinking about coming out, a sense of comfort and courage and learning and education. And that’s really what’s important.”**

Those sentiments were echoed by the dozens of students and employees in attendance, including Rainess.

“Rome wasn’t built in a day,” he said. **“I hope that, by the time you have grandchildren, we won’t even be talking about this. I don’t think it’s going to happen in my lifetime, but I am damn well going to try to educate as many people as I can...”** The best that you can do when you go out there is that, if you hear someone who is hating on someone, step in. Clear up the misconception or the misunderstanding. Give them some education. They will either tell you to go to hell or they will say thank you, but that’s the only way we’re going to do it. Bit by bit, and piece by piece.”

Attendees were also treated to lunch and refreshments, and received a number of free giveaways from Rainess, including rainbow-colored awareness ribbons and bracelets reading “Alligator Skin,” reminding students to remain tough in the face of hatred.

Keep up with all Student Life and Activities events at Brookdale by visiting the [SLA webpage](#).

Check out more photos of Seth Rainess’ talk [here](#).