

I have spent the past eleven years as Executive Director of Building A Safer Evansville (BASE) working to protect the youth of the Evansville Community. Reducing those risk factors like community norms of drinking, access to drugs and alcohol and increasing those protective factors, teaching adults how to be positive role models, talking to kids about drugs and alcohol and helping to create a community that is safe, healthy and inclusive.

Supporting the safety and health of youth in our community, means supporting ALL youth. There have been incidents over the past few months, specifically those aimed at some of our marginalized community members, that I do not believe are reflective of the caring, vibrant community of Evansville.

BASE’s journey to ensure that the prevention work we are doing in the community is equitable, led to the Board of Directors doing a deep dive into some of the local data to see what some of our marginalized communities are experiencing. What we found was stunning. In 2018, 21% of the Evansville middle and high student population identified as LGBTQ+ and 25% were "unsure" how they would identify. Students that identify as LGBTQ+ were also using substances at much higher rates than those that identify as heterosexual at Evansville High School. The data showed the majority of bisexual, gay and lesbian students never, rarely or only sometimes feel accepted at school.

The CDC has identified mental health as a significant factor that contributes to substance use, and when compared to their heterosexual and not transgender peers, our Rural Rock County LGB and T youth are far more likely to suffer poor mental health days, have self-harmed, considered or attempted suicide in the last year.

LGB & Heterosexual Youth and Mental Health, RRCC 2018 HS YRBS				
	Poor mental health days (past 30 days)	Self-Harmed (past 12 months)	Considered Suicide (past 12 months)	Attempted suicide (past 12 months)
LGB	93.0%	53%	54%	30%
Heterosexual	68%	13%	14%	8%
Transgender and Not Transgender Youth and Mental Health, RRCC 2018 HS YRBS				
	Poor mental health days (past 30 days)	Self-Harmed (past 12 months)	Considered Suicide (past 12 months)	Attempted suicide (past 12 months)
Transgender	88%	68%	58%	41%
Not Transgender	70%	17%	17%	8%

I have binders full of data and statistics, and they are heartbreaking. What this really comes down to for us as an organization is equity, kindness and compassion. Equity **means everyone is provided with what they need to succeed** and protecting our LGBTQ+ youth requires more, and different approaches. The BASE Board knew that with 21% of our youth identifying as LGBTQ+, and their drug and alcohol use and poor mental health rates being significantly higher, that we needed to do MORE and we needed targeted approaches specific to LGBTQ+ youth.

BASE has received two grants over the past two years that work specifically on reducing substance abuse for LGBTQ+ youth.

These youth need to know that they are not alone, that they are supported. As adults, it is our job to do what we can to protect them and keep them safe, to raise those protective factors that are proven to reduce youth substance abuse and reduce risk factors. Let's be clear, safety doesn't just mean that you feel safe from physical violence walking down the street. Safety also means that you feel safe mentally and emotionally; safe to simply exist. That you won't have to walk down the street and have someone shout slurs at you, see slurs and hateful words written on houses, have your supportive yard signs taken or vandalized, that you won't have to see these hateful images and words all over social media and printed in local papers.

Some ways that BASE has been working with community partners to see that we are raising protective factors is by listening to our LGBTQ+ youth, letting them express themselves and be heard. Planning inclusive events where the youth can feel safe to express who they are. BASE has been working closely with local businesses to create the Pride Partnership, why is this important you might ask? It's important that LGBTQ+ youth and community members see these very visual signs of support to know that they are safe and supported in our community. We have provided trainings to community members, staff and educators and partnered with the schools, police department and hospitals.

BASE also advocates for our LGBTQ+ youth. As an organization, it is our job to support our youth and raise up those voices that are not always heard. We will advocate for education on LGBTQ+ issues at our schools, for our community members, youth, police officers and staff. We will advocate for visual signs of representation in our city. We will advocate for changes in policies and procedures in our systems of care that promote equity, inclusivity and diversity. We will continue to advocate for the health and safety of ALL youth in our community as we work towards our vision; an Evansville community that is safe, healthy and inclusive.

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Building A Safer Evansville (BASE)