

Helping young homeless in New York back on their feet

Up to 40% of New York's young homeless are homo-, bi- or transsexual, and many of them have heavy social problems. Tanino Minneci, a social educator, tries to help the young people get back on their feet

Text and photo: Sidsel Nyholm

Some have just been kicked out from home. Others have lived rough since they were 11 or 12. Many are suicidal and most have experiences with the dark sides of life in the form of drug addiction, neglect, crime, exclusion, violence or sexual abuse.

The people Tanino Minneci meets through his work as a social educator in the grass roots group MCCNY Homeless Youth Services in New York have often hit rock bottom. MCCNY (Metropolitan Church Community of New York) operates a drop-in centre and a shelter for young homeless homo-, bi- and transsexuals, and in counselling sessions with the users the 29-year-old social educator finds that, under one set of heavy problems there is often another set of equally heavy problems.

"When we first get in contact with the young people, they are usually in deep personal crisis and their situation is dramatic. They can be suicidal, some have been arrested by the police and some have just been kicked out by their parents. Their needs are extremely immediate. Later on, myriads of highly complex problems, often related to their sexual identity, surface," Tanino Minneci explains.

According to statistics, the streets of New York

are home for 20,000-30,000 young homeless or runaways. Between 25% and 40% of them are homo-, bi- or transsexuals moving to the Big Apple from all over the country. According to Tanino Minneci, the city's general homeless centres are often "unfriendly" in their attitude to sexual minorities, and that is why there is major pressure on MCCNY and the few other shelters that specifically address young homeless gays, lesbians and bi- and transsexuals.

The MCCNY shelter Sylvia's Place in the area of Hell's Kitchen accommodates 20-25 users between the ages of 16 and 24, and almost the same number frequents the drop-in facility, the Marsha P. Johnson Center, in Harlem. The MCCNY constantly struggles to collect enough government subsidies and private donations to finance its services, and the conditions for both employees and users are extremely tight.

As the organisation's only social educator, Tanino Minneci handles all kinds of assignments, including the formulation of user action plans, contact to the authorities, therapeutic counselling as well as mediation and conflict resolution. Conflicts and physical fights easily occur in a shelter where the users live and sleep in one large basement room.

"Sylvia's Place is definitely more secure than other shelters in the city, but it inevitably leads to problems when young people live closely together under poor conditions over a longer period of time. They quarrel, form couples and become jealous of each other, and a lot of drama occurs," he says.

The dramatic situations can also result from conflicts with the surrounding environment that often condemns the lifestyle of the users, Tanino Minneci explains.



Social Educator Tanino Minneci can recognise himself in many of the young users. He has also felt that his voice was not heard and that he was outside “normal” society. “At the same time I have a natural instinct for listening to others,” he explains.

“There are tensions with the outside world. Many don’t like to have homeless people in their neighbourhood and some are hostile towards sexual minority groups. There are people who are constantly trying to find something to submit a complaint about,” he says.

Despite the sometimes very difficult conditions Tanino Minneci is extremely happy with his job. He helped to open Sylvia’s Place five years ago and refers to his commitment to MCCNY as a “life-changing experience”.

“I can relate to the personal struggles of many of the users. I recognise myself in them. I have also felt that my voice wasn’t heard and that I was outside ‘normal’ society. At the same time I have a natural instinct for listening to others,” he explains.

Tanino Minneci exactly calls the ability to listen the most important component in his work.

“Many of the users have never tried to be listened to before. I constantly hear about private matters that they have never told anybody about before. But once they feel they can openly speak and express themselves, then they become capable of handling much more and finding the strength to break negative patterns,” he says.

The work with the marginalised and homeless youth is a lifelong project for Tanino Minneci.

“It is a passion. I am going to be involved in this or similar programmes all my life,” he concludes.