



Support group for LGBTQ assault victims flounders

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Changing locations, advocates and tactics has not helped the NWA Center for Sexual Assault get its LGBTQ support group off the ground, with no one but members of the center's staff attending in recent memory.

Holly Wrobel, 27, has been the LGBTQ victim services advocate at the center since October 2019 – one of several new hires made last year, including a male Marshallese advocate, a Black advocate, a Latino advocate and a new executive director.

The NWA Center for Sexual Assault's Project ARCH program, headed by Wrobel, hosts two monthly LGBTQ support groups in partnership with Northwest Arkansas Equality. After months of poor attendance, Wrobel plans to rework the program to draw in more survivors.

"We know that the need is there because we have clients that fall under the community, but trying to get them to come to one more reminder of their assault – it's a difficult thing," Wrobel said.

Since spending the past several months getting the word out about the support group, Wrobel still spends two Tuesdays a month alone with a counselor and a social worker in an empty room, hoping for an LGBTQ person to come share their story.

The empty seats at support group are not shocking to Wrobel, who identifies as a lesbian, because she understands the pressure and concerns about coming forward.

"It's not like anybody really wants to go to a support group," Wrobel said. "And then you have the LGBTQ community that already receives so much backlash for just existing the way that we choose to exist."

To Wrobel, the LGBTQ acronym represents more than

just a collection of sexualities and gender identities.

"Each letter has its own specific percentage," Wrobel said.

While 35% of straight women experience rape, physical violence or stalking by an intimate partner, 44% of gay women and 61% of bisexual women experience the same, according to the CDC's National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey.

A smaller percentage of gay men (26%) experience rape, physical violence or stalking by an intimate partner than their straight counterparts (29%), but 37% of bisexual men indicated experiencing the same in the 2010 survey.

Of all respondents to the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey, 47% had been sexually assaulted at some point in their lives. The survey found that non-binary people who were assigned female at birth had the highest rate of sexual assault (58%), followed by all non-binary people (55%) and transgender men (51%).

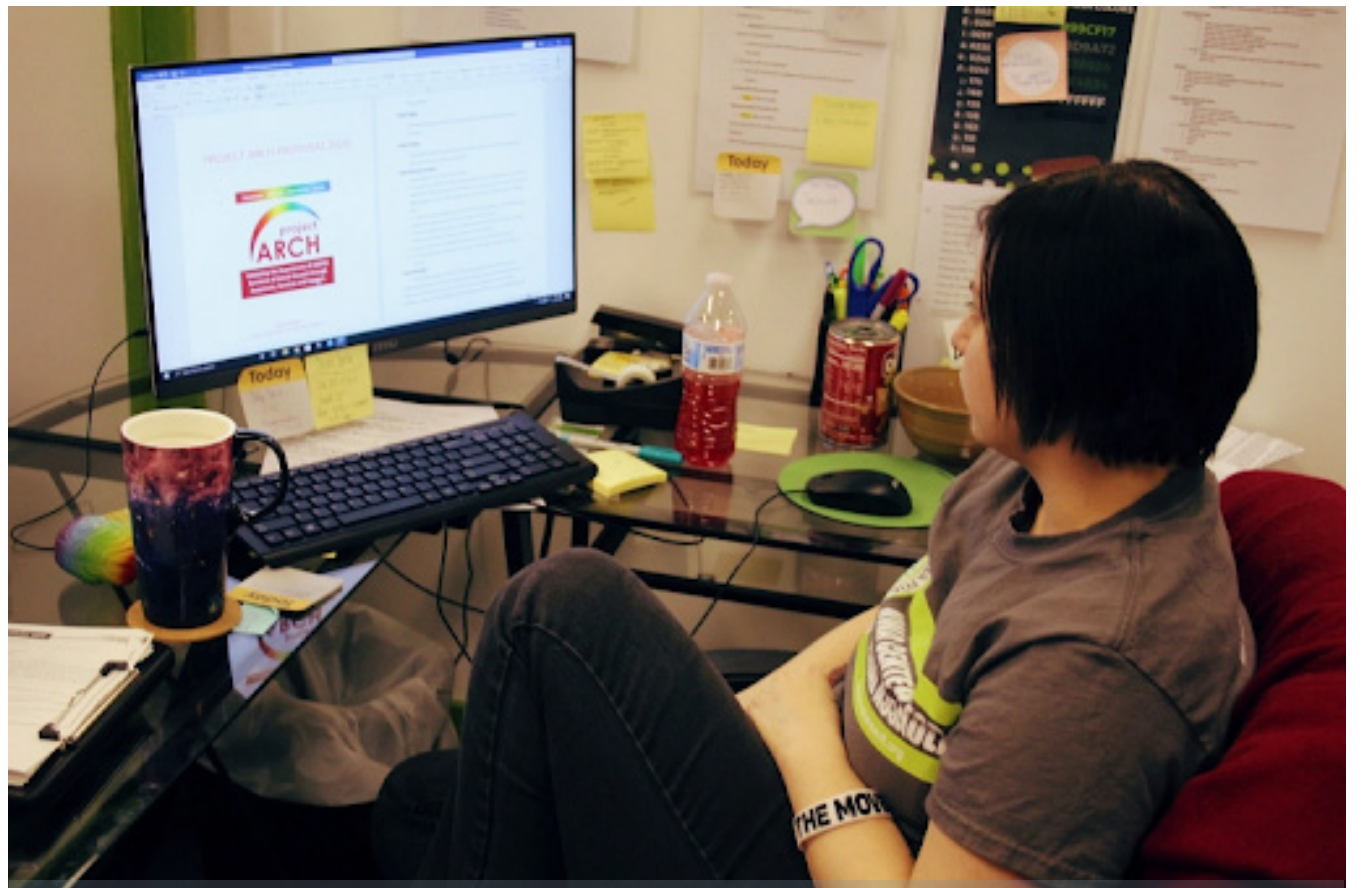
"Sexual assault doesn't just look for one type of person, and it doesn't look the same even in our community," Wrobel said.

Because LGBTQ people are not limited to one cultural background, Wrobel said it is difficult to generalize their attitudes toward sexual assault and toward reporting sexual assault.

Sexual assault rates as recorded in the 2015 survey were highest in transgender and non-binary people who identified as American Indian (65%), Multiracial (59%), Middle Eastern (58%) and Black (53%).

Instead of the traditional support group set-up, Wrobel thinks a different take on support groups might be more suitable for the LGBTQ community. Wrobel has considered yoga as an activity that is "more organic than just everybody sitting in a room and hashing out these traumatic periods in their life," she said.

"You're asking them not only



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Holly Wrobel sits at her desk at the NWA Center for Sexual Assault on Dec. 13, 2019, looking through her documents she has prepared for presentations she gives around Northwest Arkansas about LGBTQ sexual assault.

to leave their own comfortable safe spaces at home, but to step out and stand in front of other people that have experienced the same thing they have and talk about it," Wrobel said.

It is difficult for Wrobel to see an empty support group week after week for what she said is "one of the most at risk" communities while the center's other support groups have a steady stream of attendees.

Julie Kinder, the victim services coordinator at the NWA Center for Sexual Assault said concerns about confidentiality present obstacles for reporting sexual violence, especially in marginalized communities.

Despite the obstacles, Executive Director Brandon Pettit has no plans of stopping the support group.

"We know that there are survivors out there that would benefit from this support group," Pettit said. "If it's not working, we

have to be open to making some changes."

Pettit coordinated support groups as executive director of the National Alliance on Mental Illness from April 2017 to June 2019 and said it is especially difficult to start an LGBTQ support group because of challenges LGBTQ people might face "when it comes to feeling safe about expressing their assault experience."

"Trauma is not an easy thing for anybody to talk about. It's not an easy thing to deal with," Wrobel said. "Then when you have already got so much stacked against you, it's just kind of one more thing."

Wrobel grew up in Fayetteville, where she went to the UofA to pursue a degree in psychology before taking a break from school and working at Vantage Point Behavioral Health Hospital for two years. At Vantage Point, Wrobel

worked mainly with trauma survivors, especially children.

"It became what I was meant to do," Wrobel said.

Realizing that she wanted to devote her career to working with trauma survivors, Wrobel was ready to take the next step. So when she saw a job posting at the center for an LGBTQ victim services advocate, she got to work applying for the job.

"You're telling me I get to go and help victims of sexual assault, and on top of that, I also get to work with my community?" Wrobel said. "That's great, where's the catch?"

Aside from work, Wrobel volunteers at the Center for Equality for events like Rainbow Thanksgiving and the Transgender Day of Remembrance, attends LGBTQ events across NWA and plays in a metal band, Endfall, under the stage name "Sparrow."

With everything she's

involved in, Wrobel can't help but think of ways to use these channels to reach out to assault survivors within the LGBTQ community – from hosting events at the center to playing a "bands unite against sexual assault" show with her band.

Because Wrobel knows that so many factors contribute to LGBTQ survivors staying silent, she said the best thing she can do is get the word out and be prepared any time her phone rings.

"Nobody really knows about these kinds of services until they need them," Wrobel said. "We're not like a hospital, where you know exactly where it's at, you know exactly what it's for, if there's traffic you know another way to get there. Without us making our presence known, until you need (the center), you may not even know that it exists."

Center for Sexual Assault to engage men in discussion

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After hiring a new executive director, Northwest Arkansas Center for Sexual Assault executives are hoping to better include men in the conversation about rape and rape prevention.

Brandon Pettit, who was hired in October 2019 after long-time Executive Director Anne Shelley moved to work as a Research Associate for the UofA, thinks he is uniquely positioned to engage other men.

"One of our visions is seeing a community that there is no sexual assault in – the ending of sexual assault and violence in our community – and we know that 90% of all sexual assaults are perpetrated by men," Pettit said. "So if we're going to accomplish that vision or we're going to make a real impact in our

community, men – young men – have to be at the table."

Additionally, 1 in every 33 men in the U.S. have experienced an attempted or completed rape in their lifetime, and 1 out of every 10 rape victims are men, according to the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network.

Pettit's background working in victims services, with those struggling with mental health and with young male perpetrators, allows the center to break into an area of sexual assault advocacy and prevention they have not yet been able to work much in, said Justin Kohley, vice president of the center's board of directors.

"I think we'll be able to work now on the preventative measures in these conversations and then really just engaging men in general on the topic of sexual assault," Kohley said.

Kohley hopes to continue to destigmatize the conversation around sexual assault and sexual violence,

help survivors heal from trauma and advocate for more support.

"It's never very easy hearing these stories, and it's certainly difficult facing the stats in terms of how many women a year are impacted and how many men are impacted by sexual assault and violence," Kohley said.

While Pettit has spent his first three months in the position working to learn more about community engagement and partners, he said he thinks the staff is now getting to a place where they can begin to emphasize work with young men, as well as data collection.

The center already has programs that engage minority groups, including their Let's Talk program, which has held events with African American men in Memphis, Arkansas, but hope to broaden their outreach with men in general, Kohley said.

"It's an area that has really lacked in engagement and that has a real opportunity to engage, either because they didn't know about the issue

or they didn't know about the severity of the issue," Kohley said. "It's a very sensitive and kind of difficult thing for some men to grasp and handle."

While new opportunities to include male survivors and to educate men about prevention are coming, the center is still focused on its overall mission to care about those who have been affected by sexual assault or violence and to help them in whatever stage of the healing process they might be in, Kohley said.

"Our mission is to help people along the journey, regardless of what happened," Kohley said. "We want to help them toward a better life for themselves and to recover to a state of thriving."

The Northwest Arkansas Center for Sexual Assault is located at 1670 W. Sunset Ave. in Springdale and is open from 8:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. on weekdays. Those in need can also call the RAINN National Sexual Assault Hotline at (800) 656-HOPE.

oSTEM organization wins campus, national awards

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of people who've done that, I think the better for them."

Since its founding, oSTEM has grown rapidly and accomplished more than Avellaneda expected, included winning the awards for outstanding new RSO at the UofA in 2019 and rookie oSTEM chapter of the year in 2018, she said. The UA chapter's delegation received the latter award at the oSTEM national conference in Houston in November 2018.

"It was kind of shocking," Avellaneda said. "I knew that we had done a lot, and I was really proud of us. But it's really nice to get recognized, especially by nationals."

Jack West, a junior and former president of oSTEM, is proud that the organization contributed to the advancement of

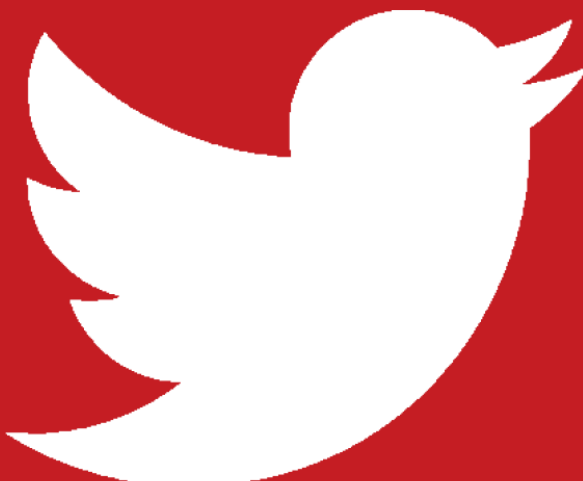
three oSTEM nominees to homecoming court in the past two years. In 2018, Anthony Azzun, then a senior, represented oSTEM on the field at homecoming.

In 2019, West and Samia Ismail, a senior, did the same.

Avellaneda thinks oSTEM's mission of empowering LGBTQ students to succeed in STEM is critical for one simple reason: the quality of science and technological advancement suffers when all people's voices aren't included, she said.

"I think it's just missing out on the people who aren't comfortable enough or don't feel safe enough to be a part of that community," Avellaneda said. "They could have the potential to invent things and do groundbreaking research, but because you told them that they aren't welcome, they aren't going to."

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