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Natasha Jackson: Keeping the 'young at heart'

Story and photos by Jason Michael

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"I felt like I was the only gay person in the world. I didn't know a community existed."

Natasha Jackson wears many hats. Her business card from the fledgling Integrated Services Youth Support agency lists three separate titles: events coordinator, outreach counselor and public relations consultant.

"What we do is provide programming and support for LGBT youth, and especially LGBT youth of color," said Jackson - who vaguely describes herself as in her "mid-20s" - of the agency's mission. "Right now, we don't have a facility, but one of the things that we do is try to figure out what kind of programming we can do to get the kids together in an organized fashion and not just jumping around, and in a fun way in which they can see that, hey, you have a community behind you."

Jackson's role in the new enterprise is diverse. As events coordinator, she creates and oversees events aimed at getting at-risk LGBT youth off the streets, such as a recent basketball tournament that took place at the Casa Maria Community Center. As the agency's PR consultant, Jackson designed its logo, created business cards for the staff and does any graphic design that ISYS may need. Jackson, however, derives her greatest joy from - and perhaps makes the biggest impact with - her outreach work.

"I go to the clubs and I give out safe-sex kits," she said. "I have a partnership with Innuendo where they let me in for free on Friday nights and I hand out dental dams and things and try to teach the lesbians about safe sex, because many of them don't think that they can get anything from another woman. Then I also go into Palmer Park and I do outreach there. Right now I'm out of materials for the safe-sex kits, because I was putting them together myself. So I'm looking for resources where I can get materials and I'm willing to just volunteer my time and hand those out."

But Jackson does more at the park than just hand out condoms and lube.

"I talk to them about their day, let them know my name, try to let them get to know me so they can trust me on whatever other issues they may be having," she said. "Currently, I've been recruiting kids for a summer youth employment initiative."

All this, and ISYS isn't even Jackson's full-time job. By day, she works with the Higher Education Opportunities Committee, a partnership between Wayne State University and Detroit Public Schools.

"I teach a higher education initiative program," Jackson said. "I encourage kids to pursue post-secondary education after high school. I have about 40 sixth

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graders that I work with. I do modules on resumes and college applications and goal setting and just a bunch of different things, things I think that will prepare them to think past high school.

"I try to incorporate some of ISYS in that, too, because no one wants to address LGBT issues, and especially at that age," Jackson continued. "But I let them know that, you know, Ms. Jackson has a job outside of this where I work with LGBT youth and I try to encourage them to not use expressions like, 'That's so gay.' I'm one of those teachers that is in there saying, 'You shouldn't say that' and 'Gay people aren't bad.' I get a little flack from some of the teachers, but hey."

Jackson, who has a Bachelor's degree in public relations from WSU, plans to return and earn her Master's. Ultimately, she would like to be the executive director of her own nonprofit agency, which will be geared, of course, at helping LGBT youth.

"I searched for this kind of support when I was younger," she said. "It was at a point when I felt so alone that I felt like I wanted to commit suicide. I felt like I was the only gay person in the world. I didn't know a community existed and I felt so socially isolated in school and in my family and church. Now, I look back on that time, and me being the strong person that I was, I was able to overcome it. But I want to help those kids that aren't able to and show them that there is someone here and you can get through it. So that's why I do the work that I do."

For more on Natasha Jackson visit www.pridesource.com.

