

Excitement mounted steadily as young people filled the large multi-purpose room of Frist Campus Center at Princeton University. Some sat quietly at tables, eating muffins and absorbing the room, decked out with identity flags, others added their responses to questions on posters all around the room, still others chatted with their neighbors as they perused their workshop options. Clumps formed, broke up, and reconfigured as new arrivals found their friends or made new ones.

Nearly 100 trans\* identified young people aged 11–26 attended the Trans\* Youth Forum at Princeton University on April 18. The forum, co-sponsored by HiTOPS, The Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network Central New Jersey Chapter, and the LGBT Center at Princeton University, was the first of its kind. Participants hailed from all over New Jersey and even from neighboring states including New York and Pennsylvania.

“I couldn't wait to see this community of many voices together in one room,” said Co-organizer Corrine O’Hara, the LGBTQ coordinator at HiTOPS. “I felt honored and grateful to be present and also took a step back to take it all in ... I was hoping they could be themselves in any way, shape or form they could on a day like this.”

“I thought that the forum was really amazing, honestly. I was really impressed by the turnout, especially since it’s the first year that it’s ever happened, so it was really nice to see ... how many people actually came out and participated in it,” said Avatara Smith-Carrington, a presenter at the forum and the director of “To Queer Things Up,” a documentary web-series and running dictionary of the word queer as defined by queer people. (Author’s note: while queer was historically used as a slur, it has been reclaimed by much of the younger LGBTQ community and, while still somewhat controversial, is becoming more broadly accepted.)

The day began with addresses from the organizers followed by a panel featuring six trans youth of diverse ages and backgrounds, who spoke about their own experiences with their identities. Topics also varied broadly, from experiences in school to struggles with parents to finding community. “It was sobering and difficult and painful but also real and showed their strength,” said O’Hara. “After the panel I loved how Amy (Fabrikant, the panel’s moderator) asked everyone to reach for a hand and take a deep breath and acknowledge the pain, suicide attempts, bullying, misunderstanding ... and how we are all here together and to hold on to one another ... It was just right and lovely and was a great transition to moving into the first session of workshops.”

Following the panel, participants attended their first workshop, choosing from six different options ranging from “Trans\*cendentalism: A Journey to Self Care” to “Finding Spirituality No Matter What Form It Takes.”

Nathan Rodriguez led two workshops throughout the day: “I-Dentity” and “Parents Just Don’t Understand...?” which he presented with his father. At the first workshop, Rodriguez led an interactive activity, reading a statement about gender identity and asking participants to move to different parts of the room based on to what extent they agreed or disagreed. “I really wanted to make it interactive, have people hear each other out but also have a chance to think out loud and maybe think about things in a different way,” he said. “I was learning as much from the attendees as I was teaching in my talk,” Rodriguez said. “The youth in the community are just so smart. They are so insightful and so in touch with each other and so in touch with themselves ... I can only hope that they got as much from me as I got from them.”

One nonbinary student who attended the forum specifically cited Rodriguez’s workshop as a highlight. “I thought it was helpful because it gave a bunch of different views on the same

thing,” he said, citing the diverse views on statements such as “My gender is the most important part of my identity.”

After the first session, participants reconvened in the multi-purpose room for lunch and a rousing keynote performance by J Mase III, a black trans poet who is educator and founder of awQward talent LLC. Instead of a typical keynote speech, Mase performed several spoken word poems and answered audience questions about himself and his work.

“I think that it’s really important for trans people in particular to tell our stories, and so I think that poetry’s one of those vehicles,” Mase said. “I think that us being clear about who we are and what our missions are is important, and so I think poetry on the individual level really helps us to determine where we need to go, it helps us imagine a little bit better what our liberation actually looks like.”

As Mase often performs for primarily cisgender (not trans) audiences, he said his experience at the forum was particularly meaningful. “It’s nice to be understood, and it’s nice to be among people that need to feel also like they’re understood,” he said. “My hope is that we know that we’re deserving of our space, and of our rights, and making space for each other.”

A trans, nonbinary teenager who attended the forum said Mase’s poetry and workshop were particularly meaningful to him. “[J Mase] was awesome and I went to his workshop too and his poems were really great, and it was cool because they weren’t all about being sad ... he was a very bright, cheerful, funny guy,” he said. “It was a day where it was more about celebration and growth and how far we’ve come than about mourning.”

After two more workshop sessions with options as varied as in the morning, participants reconvened again, this time breaking off into two groups, one for a craft activity and the other for a round of “speed friending,” before closing remarks.

Overall, participants deemed the forum a success. “It was a really great experience for me,” said the trans teenager. “It was just such a moment of community, and especially a moment of offline community, because a lot of it is online-based, especially with youth now. So it was really, really cool to be able to see and meet and talk to all of these people who identify similarly or who I understand ... It just reaffirmed my faith in the community.”

The trans teenager also felt the forum had given him purpose going forward. “It made me feel motivated,” he said. “I want to go into social work specifically with a focus on queer youth who need help with homelessness, with psychiatry, all of those things, substance abuse and things like that that affect us so much, I want to work on that, and the forum made me feel like that was something possible.”

A queer student who attended the forum said the forum eased her uncertainty about her identity. “I realized that there’s so many people out there who are in positions like myself where we kind of just don’t fit into the molds of society, so it gave me more confidence in myself and just being who I am, and that whoever I am is ok and is great.”

Presenters also spoke to the importance of the forum. “I remember thinking that I felt really isolated at that time I was coming out, and so it’s really beautiful to see a bunch of folks that are in their teens and twenties talking about being trans, openly, and being excited about it,” Mase said.

Rodriguez said the most important takeaway from the forum is hope. “I really hope that what [youth] are taking away from these things is that there’s hope, that there’s people that get it, and that there’s people that have been there and that are ok. I hope that they can find confidence; I hope they can find peace within themselves, because the world is not a peaceful place for us,” he said.

O'Hara said she hopes the forum will lead to more collaborations. "Almost 100% of the participants would attend again and I feel like we have a great template to build on and lots of strong resources to draw from so I hope we can do more and continue to work with the many presenters and organizations that are doing such good work for transgender, non-binary, gender non-conforming, genderqueer, gender questioning youth and young adults," she said.

The presenters all emphasized that more events like the Trans\* Youth Forum are critical to the community. "This can't be just a once-in-a-blue-moon thing, this is so important for people to see in frequency to meet up again and again and to say, hey, we're still here," Rodriguez said. "When forums like this begin to build the momentum ... it's just like a steamroller, you can't stop it."