

RESIST

Funding Social Change Since 1967

[Home](#) [About RESIST](#) [Grant Program](#) [Resources](#) **[Newsletters](#)** [Support RESIST](#) [Contact Us](#) [Search](#)

Who We Are



Funding Social Change



Resisting Illegitimate Authority

[Newsletter](#)

[Resources](#)

[Events](#)

[The Call to RESIST](#)

March-April 2008 Newsletter

[Newsletter](#) > [Table of Contents](#) >

Youth Fight Displacement -- and Win!

FIERCE youth in New York City build coalitions to challenge privatization

by [Glo Ross](#)

Lately, without intending to, we have been surprising people.

Perhaps in the current political context the surprising element makes sense. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth of color, who are often the most powerless and oppressed in the systems we live in, are exercising political power.

LGBT youth of color live at intersections of race, gender, class, sexuality, and age. For most of our community, this means facing disproportionate rates of unsafe schools, violence at home, harassment on the streets, limited safe housing, and decreasing access to safe public space. Our work at FIERCE, a membership-based community organization for LGBT youth of color, has been an undertaking of the seemingly unthinkable: to take these varied experiences and find opportunities for empowerment, community building, and creative visioning for a reality we are working to create. Bold and visionary? Yes. Surprising? Not to us.

No place like home

LGBT youth of color have always been fighting back and creating alternative spaces in which their identities are honored. We need only look at the history of the Stonewall Rebellion 39 years past, the culture of voguing, and the daily resistance wrapped up in the act of being openly queer and gender non-conforming regardless of a system that values something else altogether. In New York City, as in other cities, LGBT youth face the specter of private development projects that displace our communities and our culture. Since 2001, FIERCE has been fighting to preserve the West Village and the Christopher Street piers as a safe space for LGBT youth who call the Village and the piers home.

It is also in the West Village where the Hudson River Park Trust (HRPT), a public-private partnership that took control of the West Side piers, set to use private commercial money to develop the park space on the waterfront. The HRPT started with the Christopher Street pier first by fencing it off and redeveloping it – only to open it up in 2003 with a 1:00am curfew and a \$25,000 permit fee for service vans to park on the pier.

LGBT youth who historically came to the pier at all hours to feel safe, access medical services or emergency housing referrals, had been shut out of the entire redevelopment process. In spite of the new fountain and manicured lawns lauded by some as a quality of life improvement, LGBT youth feel less safe with park enforcement patrol officers swooping by at 1:00am to push them off of the pier. Once forced off the pier, the next challenge includes having to navigate harassment from police and some residents who see LGBT youth as dirty “leftovers” that need to be cleaned off the streets.

“The Village is a place where LGBT youth can form friendships and bonds and be themselves with less chance of danger” says X Revels, a FIERCE member. “However, LGBT youth who have long contributed to the culture of the Village for decades deserve a place where they can come to all year-round in order to be safe from encountering hateful violence.”

Youth Housing Crisis

LGBT youth do not own property and can't afford rent in the West Village. We are young, marginally housed, and often poor people of color. A 2007 data analysis of homeless youth nation-wide suggests that 20 to 40 percent of homeless youth are LGBT identified. In New York City, that rate is around 40 percent. Ultimately, we learned that money means access to public space and that being young, queer, and of color often means that someone else determines what spaces you can and can't access. FIERCE has been able to build the capacity of our community to organize strategic campaigns that win real change in people's lives based on a seemingly radical notion: that we all, regardless of our identities or access to money, have a right to safe public space. John, a 19-year-old FIERCE member, highlights this importance by adding, "The biggest reason my friends and I go to the West Village, along with other queer youth, is because we feel comfortable and safe there. [It's] a place where I don't have to be afraid to walk on the streets holding onto another guy and worrying about what people are going to say. The West Village is like a second home to me."

Development Plans and Opposition

During the past year, FIERCE has opposed private development on Pier 40, which is located a stone's throw south of the Christopher Street Pier (Pier 45) in the West Village. These private development initiatives have placed profit before community needs and have put forth proposals that will further displace LGBT youth of color out of the West Village. Within the past few months we have made great strides in re-inventing the way development decisions are being made. Most recently, the Hudson River Park Trust has encouraged FIERCE to put together a proposal on how LGBT youth would shape the uses and space on Pier 40.

Now is a time of incredible opportunity to push the practice of community-led development. We began by documenting what LGBT youth were experiencing, their needs, and their creative vision for the future of the West Village and Christopher Street. We not only talked about what kinds of services and spaces would be most needed in a LGBT youth center on Pier 40, but we also thought more critically about how relationships between LGBT youth and the police, the residents, and business owners would also change. We compiled this information in a recommendation that we submitted to the HRPT, complete with architectural renderings of what we envisioned the LGBT youth center to look like.

Additionally, FIERCE has been able to support the formation of a coalition among West Village residents, local Community Boards, and little leagues to oppose private commercial development on Pier 40. These alliances speak to the effective organizing LGBT youth have engaged in to shape the perception and dialogue in the West Village – a momentum that has created a space in which residents and Community Board members are actively asking how development processes are impacting LGBT youth. In creating intentional space to link struggles, we are organizing at the intersections in which we live, expanding and complicating what LGBT and youth-issue organizing look like. We are set on building a movement that acts on the principle that our struggle – any struggle – will not be effective unless we are doing the hard work of strategic coalition building.

Connecting Safe Space and Justice

FIERCE continues to make clear connections between issues of displacement, safe public space, and violence. While sharing the stories of LGBT youth of color finding safe space in the West Village under attack, we have begun to weave together common threads that link our struggles here in New York to those currently unraveling in Miami, New Orleans, Los Angeles, and elsewhere. As we unwrap these similarities and stand in solidarity with other community struggles, at least one thing remains clear: we are being systematically pushed out. LGBT youth of color are ushered out of our homes, schools, and safe spaces every day as access to vital resources and opportunities decreases. We have been declared a remnant of West Village history and are more likely to be honored through the preservation of monuments than by the presence of our people, community, and the culture we create.

Our current positioning could not have been possible without the intentional growth of LGBT youth of color leadership and a strong dedication to a membership-led model that ensures that our work is driven by the people who are directly experiencing the various systems of oppression that we live under. Imagine a development process that is led by community input from LGBT youth of color! It's happening and FIERCE stands at the front lines of this unique struggle to push for legitimate right to safe space regardless of identity or access to money.

Glo Ross is the Lead Organizer at New York's FIERCE, a former RESIST grantee.

Top

[Back to table of contents for this issue.](#)

Copyright © [RESIST, Inc.](#), 1998 through 2008

259 ELM STREET, SUITE 201 - SOMERVILLE, MA 02144 - TEL: 617 623-5110