**Safe Zone Ally Training**

Safe Zone is the University of South Florida’s institutionally recognized LGBTQ+ diversity training program that educates members of USF’s community on advocacy by promoting understanding through educated and supportive allies. This training provided an insight into the world of the LGBTQ+ community and how to become an ally through empathy and support. Allies are members of the USF community who are supportive of and knowledgeable about LGBTQ+ identities and issues. These individuals wish to be a visible support for people of all sexual and gender identities and expressions. 

The interactive and engaging training began with a glimpse into LGBTQ+ history, as October is LGBT history month. The significance of Safe Zone’s pink triangle (pictured above) represents the patch given to homosexual men in the Holocaust concentration camps during World War II. The Stonewall Inn Bar is recognized as the location for the beginning of the gay civil rights movement; “The Stonewall Riots” occurred in 1969 as a result of police harassment and brutality against LGBTQ patrons. Reflective aspects of the workshop included recognizing points of privilege that many members of the LGBTQ+ community still do not receive.

Moving forward, the workshop addressed breaking down identity. Although the acronym LGBTQ+ is frequently applied, the official acronym includes Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning, Queer, Intersex, Asexual and Pansexual individuals. The plus sign represents all other individuals. A person’s identity is multifaceted, encompassing sexual orientation, biological sex, gender expression and gender identity. It is appropriate to respectfully ask how people would like to be referred to regarding their pronoun (his, him, he; her, hers, she; their theirs, they’re; or any other that the individual prefers). Supporting individuals as they develop their own identity involves recognizing the fluidity and nonlinear aspects of the coming out process. For some people, identity development, growth and affirmation of self may occur during their time at USF.

Through the perspective of an educator, it is crucial to have an understanding of how gender identity, gender expression, biological sex, and sexual orientation can influence our students’ social interactions and academic endeavors. Allies, within the USF community and classrooms beyond, respect and support the identities presented to them. Students are coming to the classroom from diverse backgrounds, often they are not part of the idealized “nuclear family,” so it is important to avoid stereotyping or assuming. Gender norms and other heteronormative-based assumptions should not be placed in the classroom. For example, students should be allowed to read books and learn with manipulatives that are not given to them on the basis of socially-constructed gender norms. The classroom environment should be a safe place that allows students to learn and grow together, with respect for each other’s differences.

Disturbingly, forty percent of homeless youth are LGBTQ+.

Will you be the educator that acts as an ally to support, accept, affirm and welcome students of the LGBTQ+ community?

*Amanda Silebi & Mekayla Cook*

October 18th, 2016