

For Immediate Release

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## **OCUUF Equality Project Examines Health and Safety of LGBTQ+ Youth, Sept. 28**

FOND DU LAC—The health and safety of LGBTQ+ youth will be examined at the Sept. 28 Equality Project gathering, 6-8 p.m., at Open Circle Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, 19 3rd St., in downtown Fond du Lac. The Equality Project is a monthly gathering to educate, support, and take action to achieve equality for LGBTQ+ persons. The evening begins with a 6 p.m. potluck, and continues with a presentation and discussion from 6:30-8 p.m. All Fond du Lac residents who stand on the side of love are invited to attend.

“Research shows that LGBTQ+ youth in America report high rates of bullying, depression, and homelessness. In fact, LGBT youth are overrepresented in foster care, juvenile detention, and among homeless youth, where studies show 25 to 50 percent of these kids are on the street due to conflict over their sexual orientation or gender identity,” said Equality Project Coordinator Christopher Szymczak. “Suicide rates also are higher than average for gay teens. Despite these hardships, LGBTQ+ youth also show great resilience, especially when they are able to access programs and support in their schools and communities.”

Teachers, school counselors, school administrators and parents are especially invited to attend this Thursday evening session, which will feature local psychotherapist Leann Vice-Reschel, M.A., L.P.C., who works with children and adolescents. Vice-Reschel has Safe Zone certification and also facilitates the LGBTQ Adult Community Support Group at St. Agnes Hospital.

Discussion will include statistics of the health and safety of LGBTQ+ youth; laws pertaining to these issues and how to help; national and area programs of support; and additional local resources. Szymczak and Open Circle leaders sent invitations directly to many Fond du Lac middle and high school staff, as well as to city and county leaders.

According to PFLAG, a national alliance of parents, allies and LGBTQ people, reliable estimates indicate that between 4 and 10 percent of the population is gay, which means a school system of approximately 7,300 like Fond du Lac, likely has between 300 and 700 LGBTQ students.

“We need these kids to know they have allies in the community, even if they are experiencing rejection at home or from peers,” Szymczak said. “Teen years can be hard for so many reasons, and LGBTQ youth may need—and deserve—additional support. We want them to become the talented adult citizens we

know they are destined to be. Joining our community together and offering regular support are the big reasons we have created the Equality Project.”

Like the local Humanity Project, with its goal of getting past race as a barrier, The Equality Project aims to remove gender and sexuality as barriers in understanding each other, and to improve relationships across the community. Upcoming Equality Project topics include LGBT History Month on Oct. 11; Transgender Day of Remembrance on Nov. 30; and an HIV/AIDS update on Dec. 7.

“We have embraced radical hospitality,” said Open Circle President Lisette Aldrich. “Open Circle is a welcoming and safe place for all folks, a sanctuary. This supports the core idea that first grabbed me in my religious education in my childhood: Love One Another.”

Unitarian Universalists strongly believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and the spiritual practice of welcome is a very important part of UU faith communities. For 25 years, congregations have worked hard to make sure lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people are full members of UU faith communities. Being welcoming means striving for radical inclusion, and creating spaces that honor every part of individuals’ identities, backgrounds, and experiences.

Open Circle Sunday services are at 10 a.m.

Follow Open Circle Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/Open-Circle-Unitarian-Universalist-Fellowship-115997188421362/> and on the web at <http://www.ocuuf.org/> . Also follow The Equality Project on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/equalityprojectfdl/>.

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