



The House That Builds HOPE

First Trans shelter in U.S. is here in the Valley

By Gina Read

The house is large and roomy, sleeping eight and sometimes more. It has seven bedrooms, a large screen TV, wireless, a pool table, a nice patio and pool, and many other amenities. BUT, this is not why Joy Lilois spent her last \$14 to change her Greyhound bus ticket so she could leave two hours earlier for the 38-hour journey.

Originally from Louisville Mississippi, Joy is a veteran of United States Army. A combat engineer, Joy spent tours of duty in Iraq. She came to Arizona in the effort to begin the transformation from male to female, but mostly she came for safety, security, and for community.

"Where I am from there is very little to no understanding of transgender people. It is very hostile toward anyone who is different. I was desperately searching online to find a safe place."

A safe place is what Aubrey and Jordon, twins, were seeking too.

When the twins' family became hostile upon learning that the girls had long felt they were boys, it started a downward spiral that led to them being captives in a "friend's" home.

"We had known him for ten years, but had no idea he was an alcoholic and mentally unstable," says Aubrey. Nor did they know that the man was obsessed with Jordon.

"I would wake up to find him in the room staring at us as we slept. When Aubrey would be at work at night he would start drinking then start fighting

with me. He would accuse me of not thinking he was attractive enough. He would just keep hammering me with things like - we didn't treat him right, we didn't listen to him," says Jordon.

Aubrey was frantically looking for shelters while at work, but they didn't fit the demographics for any shelter. "We were trapped," he says.

In the meantime the man became more controlling. He wouldn't let them access the Internet, he refused to let them talk to friends and then he refused to let them talk to each other, and would not allow them to close their bedroom door.

"If he thought he heard us talking he would go ballistic and twist what he thought he had heard us say," says Aubrey. But the worse was yet to come.

The man did not want Jordon to transition so he was not allowed to leave the house unless the man accompanied him.

Then one night Jordon woke up in extreme pain. "Something did happen to me in my sleep. I knew something had happened but I was in denial." Jordon started sleeping with a knife and a baseball bat. Suffering from autism, Jordon started to retreat in to himself.

At work Aubrey continued to try and find someone to help, chatting and corresponding with Trans people. Month after month passed by.

"I knew it would never end. I would walk 40 minutes to get back home in the freezing weather, and then think 'I could easily turn, walk to the river jump and it would all be over with,'" says Aubrey, joking up. "But knowing Jay had no where to go and no one to

turn to kept me from taking that direction."

Then one night at work their prayers were answered. Two bus tickets were being wired for them to leave for Phoenix. Aubrey told his co-workers what was happening and they went to the house, got Jordon and their few belongings and were on their way.

Born and raised in Phoenix, Gavin Turnbow says he had been screwing up his life for a decade.

"I'd been in four relationships, two of them were long-term. Each relationship became more abusive more chaotic. My life has been in turmoil ever since I can remember," said the young Trans man.

Coping by smoking pot and drinking, Gavin says he was a junior alcoholic when he crashed his car into a light pole in 2007. The year before, he had told his adoptive parents that he was a man trapped in a female body. At the time he was living with them and was taking testosterone shots. "I told them it wasn't their fault it wasn't anything that they had done. It was just something that had happened."

His parents told Gavin that if he wanted to stay he could not continue with the hormone therapy. So for two years Gavin refrained from the shots and went by his former girl name.

Then last March things came to a head during one of the family's frequent arguments. "My mother said I was crazy, that I needed inpatient therapy and that she didn't believe anything I told her. His father physically attacked him and the police had to be called to intervene. "I think he would have killed me if the police hadn't arrived."

Gavin's parents disowned him.

"After a lot of drama and heartache they decide to cut ties with me. I'd rather say we are estranged because I don't like to think they disowned me. I'm trying to reframe it."

Gavin floundered for three months "not being successful". He ran out of money, sold his car, and moved in with his best friend. The two friends would smoke pot, but as Gavin tried to sober up his friend began to smoke more. "It was so unstable, I was just waiting to fall."

Having befriended Aubrey and Jordon online, they told him to come and talk to Michael Brown. Gavin didn't want to ask for help, he had been on his own for so long and was surviving. But then he got to the point where he says he couldn't do it any longer. "I didn't want that life any more."

Scheduled to have a hysterectomy, Michael and Lillian Brown told Gavin to come to HOPE House after the surgery and they would take care of him for a few days and see how it went.

"I came for a week and stayed to help with 'Fit to a T' and then stayed to help with the 4th of July party. Then I signed the agreement to live here." For the first time since I sat down with him, Gavin smiles. "That was the best thing I've ever done. That was the most positive step in the right direction for my future. It was more important than getting my GED or stopping drinking and the pot. It was better than pursuing an associates degree. It was more positive than any of those things. It made me live instead of existing."

Welcome to H.O.P.E. (Healing, Opportunity, Promise, Empowerment) House, the first and unfortunately the only Trans safe house/shelter in the country, perhaps even the world. In a state known more and more for its conservatism, Arizona houses the only Trans shelter and one of the only recover/sober living shelters for Trans people – THIS IS H.O.W. "TES" Transgender Emergency Shelter is getting ready to open a shelter, Azalea Hill in Macon Mississippi, but still lacks funding.

H.O.P.E. House was conceived by Michael and Lillian Brown in 2008. A Trans man, Michael married Lillian four years ago. As a co-founder of Trans-Mentors International Inc., Michael saw the need for the house.

"Too many Trans people are kicked out by their families, by friends, by apartment managers. They have no place to go. I'm finding more and more are coming from abusive situations because they are unable to cope with what is happening inside. They can't stand up for themselves because they are ashamed. They haven't learned the coping tools to live productive lives. No one who needs a safe place to stay will ever be turned away due to lack of money," says Michael.

In October 2008, an 18 year-old Trans youth who was kicked out by his parents came to live with Michael and Lillian.

"He came first, then someone from out of state got in touch with me said I'm moving to Phoenix I need a place for two or three months until I get a job and get on my feet. We let her move in. Then someone else got a hold of us, so there we were with three people and us in a one-bedroom apartment. It kept growing from there. People started hearing that we were there to give a room or a couch."



H.O.P.E. House founders Michael and Lillian Brown

The "House" was moved first to a two-bedroom apartment, then to a four-bedroom house in June 2009. In September 2010, Michael and Lillian purchased a large five-bedroom home and immediately added two more bedrooms, making a total of seven, to accommodate the growing need for safe housing in the Trans community. The money for the house came from their own savings. Lillian's job in the healthcare field has been the main support for the house and its inhabitants. Since its inception, H.O.P.E. House served over 3071 bed nights through December 22, 2011.

Besides the shelter, group support at H.O.P.E. House include Sunday Genderific Groups, and weekly Friday T-Night get-togethers which are open to the entire Trans community and all allies, along with other planned events and socials throughout the year. H.O.P.E. Everyone who attends is made to feel welcomed.

"Most of us grow up knowing something was wrong but having no clue what that was. Something finally clicks and we go 'that's what's wrong.' But until that point we really don't know what it is. We are so busy knowing that we are different."

Joy, Aubrey, Jordon and Gavin all said they knew there was something "different" at an early age. All four first came out as gay or lesbian.

Joy came out at age 12 to her parents and was promptly shipped off to an in-house mental health facility for four weeks.

She says she always felt something was different, something was wrong. "It was not until I watched a Ricki Lake show on transgender people that I had a name to call what I had been feeling for all those years."

As children the twins played the so-called "boy" parts such as Hans Solo or Zorro. They were always transfixed by male figures. When their mother told them they would have to wear boy's jeans because they were too rough on their clothing, they were thrilled.

As Aubrey grew older he dressed acrogenously. "I remember wanting to be Boy George and trying to braid my hair. I fixated on Boy George because he was a boy but also looked like a girl and we could be that."

He ventured into the gay club scene but realized

something still didn't fit. He hung out with a friend and was thrilled when someone thought he was a boy. "It was the greatest thing ever."

Once Aubrey realized that he was Trans, a friend suggested he sit down and talk to Jordon. "I told Jordon and he started crying and said me too. That was that."

They told their father first, who was divorced from their mother. He accepted them as his sons. But after telling their mother, who threatened him with violence should he side with them, his ill health forced him to say that he couldn't see them any more.

"We think he passed on, but we don't know for sure. He always wanted boys. They were told after the first sonogram that they were having a boy, then the next one they were told they were having twin boys. Then oops it was two girls. They had our male names picked out and everything," says Jordon.

The twins are content to know that the last time they did speak to him he loved them as his sons.

Gavin says he always felt like a disappointment to his parents. He too first came out as a lesbian, but when he told his parents he felt he was meant to be male, it was the last straw.

Michael understands, he too dealt with losing his family.

"I was very angry I guess it was because I was suppressing who I was. When I ended up in therapy I was teaching in a college and during a class I lost it. I walked out of the room went on a three-week drunk, which I don't remember most of it. When I got done I went back to my boss told him I had screwed up and needed a sabbatical to get help."

Michael immediately checked himself into a clinic and got help. There he realized his drinking wasn't the problem, it was the coping mechanism. He also realized that he was Trans, but most importantly he learned the tools that would save his life. He lived out of his car for three months then found friends who would let him stay on their couch. I look back and see that people were good to me, so I just pass it on to someone else."

Although his dad was accepting, his mother was not. He says it wasn't a close relationship anyway. "But I know for some people losing their family is devastating, but there are far more problems," Michael says.

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"By the time they end up here most have been looking for work with no success. A lot of that is they don't know how to look for work, but more than that they are usually so depressed because they have always viewed themselves as 'different' or 'wrong' that they can barely function."

H.O.P.E. House offers structure. Everyone must get up by 7 a.m., make their beds, get ready and physically leave the house by 8:30 to look for work. They are not to return until 4 p.m. They must keep a log of the businesses they have gone to, and who they contacted. "Many times we have to just learn to walk up shake someone's hand and introduce ourselves and ask if they are looking for work. It's all just strength building," says Michael.

Having been through cognitive therapy, Michael feels it is essential to changing a person's life for the better.

"They teach you A, B, C etc. Unfortunately, most of us get stuck on that 'B' because of they way we have reacted to external things. I work with everyone here to start reframing. We teach not to assume that when someone says something negative it is an attack on you. Or, how to react to things like when a button gets pushed not to react with anger - to understand that it is just one of the triggers you have and how to deal with it. Keeping a positive attitude and taking steps like making your bed, keeping your room clean, all the things that most of us were taught as kids, but somewhere we lost that because we were too involved in what was happening inside us, those are the things that help reshape us.

"When people get here life wasn't working the way they were trying to live it. By the time they arrive they are willing to try something different and it works. Everything they do prepares them such as chores having to be done by bedtime. It's all preparing them to get out there, get up, get to work on time and earn a paycheck and feel good about it.

"I care about each person who comes here. There are some that I can tell right away are not going to work, whether they are not capable or not willing, we've had both. I care about them so I find something that will work for them because I am not going to kick them out on the street. That's why they came here in the first place. I care about all of them."

Michael has been called a Nazi because he is so structured. He likes things clean he says it is someone's first impression of you and your home. Despite the rules, or maybe because of them, all of the residents think of Michael as a father and Lillian as a mother.

Coming to H.O.P.E. House for the twins means safety, but much more.

"I broke down crying. He [Michael] said 'you have a community behind you and they [family] can't hurt you even if they do show up.' He promised we would be the 'boys' and we are. It's been wonderful. I like working with Michael. I have a job where everyone knows I am transitioning and they are supportive. It feels like I've been running my whole life and to find these people here, it is a Godsend," says Aubrey.

"I was terrified of confrontation because the last time I was shoved into a wall and beaten down. Michael taught us that it is okay to stand up for yourself.

I had been depressed because I couldn't go anywhere and I had this psycho holding us hostage. My anxiety was off horrible. Michael prodded me into going to a therapist. It is all about tough love here, but that is the point - there is love here. From the moment I got with my therapist my anxiety and autism are so much better and now I'm making steps forward because of Michael," exclaimed Jordon.

Although therapy has helped Jordon, both brothers attribute most of his gains to Michael.

"Jordon was terrified to answer the phone. Now Michael has him answering and making phone calls for TransMentors. He actually is acting like his old self but even better says," Aubrey.

"There's just something about him [Michael]. They are like mom and dad here. No matter how much we have screwed up he is going to do what he can to support you. He doesn't want to give up on anybody. He tells you in a gentle way that this is what you should be doing. Or, that this is something he feels you can do, and before you know it you are say to yourself 'Yes, I can do this!' You can handle everything that comes your way. He is so nurturing," says Jordon.

The boys get up at 5:30 every morning just so they can have an hour with Michael before everyone else gets up. "We talk about everything, I never had that with anyone before," says Aubrey. "We can face people here we can reach out to someone we care about and that it is okay to hug them or ask for a hug. We've learned that someone is not going to want something from us when they give us a hug or tell us that we are loved. They do what they do because of love."

The twins describe Lillian as very quiet but very direct. They love making her laugh.

"At first you think she is very stern but then you realize she is real bubbly and sweet. And because she does so much and works really hard we feel if she wants the TV then she gets the TV. She deserves that - she deserves respect," says Jordon.

A nurse, Lillian taught both boys how to give themselves the injections of hormones that they take daily and not to fear the needle. She works long hours, which is not lost on the twins. For Mother's Day they took her out and when people asked if she were their mom they didn't hesitate to say "yes". Aubrey went so far as to put on his Facebook that he was taking out the only woman he had ever known that had truly been a mother to him and Jordon.

Since coming to H.O.P.E. House two months ago, Joy has become much more open and has begun to push her masculinity to the side and start becoming who she truly is. She has found a job and is working on making friends. Joy is also enrolled at the Phoenix Veterans Hospital in a pilot program that has a transgender program for veterans of the military forces.

"The V.A. is a very slow process, but they have therapists that deal with gender identity. After therapy I will get a letter of recommendation that will send me to endocrinology for hormone therapy and other medications. I'm definitely on the right track," says Joy.

Military still classifies "gender identity" as a severe mental defect and as "body mutilation". So even if Joy completes her transformation she will not be able to

return to the military as a female. Still, she is grateful for all that Michael, Lillian, Aubrey, Jordon and Gavin have done for her. "They accepted me."

For Gavin, H.O.P.E. House he says saved him.

"It has saved me in practically every way there could be. Saved me from my demons. Michael and Lillian didn't step in front of my demons or try to diminish them, they gave me the tools. Here's the sword here's the shield you can attack your demons on your own and you can win. We will show you how and that's what they did. They helped me get a therapist, helped me understand that it is okay to be on medication that it doesn't mean you are crazy or weak.

"The program itself, the structure of the house, and the unwavering support of Michael and Lillian and the rest of the house is something I have never experienced in my life. I have never known this kind of compassion."

Gavin says Michael, Lillian, Aubrey, Jordon and even Joy whom he has known only a short time are his family. He also sees some of the men and women who come to TransMentor's programs each week as extended family. "They are my uncles, my aunts my cousins. It has given me something that I never had before, a feeling of home."

Although he says he will always call H.O.P.E. House home, he knows that it is the people within the house and programs that are his home.

"No matter where I go in my life I know they are going to be here. If I need to call and bitch for five minutes about something they understand that. Michael allows you to get mad, but then he makes you use that energy in a positive way. Focus that anger, re-channel it into something positive something constructive. They teach you to reframe your thoughts to go from negative to positive. You break your old habits, you formulate new ones. So many people come here from devastation of some sort and it's not a recovery from some substance it is a recovery from your life that was. Michael steps in and says 'shut up, stop for a minute and think. In that darkness you are the light that can guide yourself out. You remember that.' He reminds you that there are real compassionate people out there and not to give up on humanity."

For Gavin who aspires to be a minister, that was something he says he needed to realize and that it was a powerful moment.

Although he didn't see himself with a large family, Michael says he can't imagine doing anything else. "They need the laughter, they need the rules, they need the relaxation time, and they need to know someone cares. So that is what we try to give them."

Michael's ideal would be to have a H.O.P.E. House everywhere. For now he is focused on raising enough money to open a second house that would be a 501(c)(3) that Aubrey and Jordon would run.

When asked how long he will keep housing people, holding support groups and running TransMentors, he says, "Until there is no need."

For more information, or to donate please email info@transmentors.org or go to transmentors.org

To view a video on H.O.P.E. House produced by the "I'm from Driftwood" series, visit ntouchaz.com.