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After Working the Streets, Bunk Beds and a Mass

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Robert Stolarik for The New York Times

Michelle, 19, is one of the residents of the two-bedroom apartment in Astoria that is perhaps the only homeless shelter in New York intended specifically for transgender youth.

By COREY KILGANNON Published: May 2, 2007

Every Sunday morning in a second-floor apartment in Astoria, Queens, the Rev. Louis Braxton Jr. rouses a half-dozen sleeping bodies from bunk beds in two cramped rooms littered with stiletto heels and skimpy dresses.

The groggy young adults reach for their makeup kits and fight for the lone bathroom. Once their makeup, hair and clothes are just right, they trudge into the living room, holding handbags and teetering on high heels, and sit facing an altar set up by Father Braxton.

An Episcopal priest, he says Mass and prays for their souls. He makes passing references to sins of the flesh, appropriately enough, since his flock has spent the previous night working as prostitutes on the "tranny stroll" near Roosevelt Avenue in Jackson Heights, where men go for quick sex with men who look like women.

These worshippers — Princess, Kelly, Michelle, Skye, Gianni and Terry, all teenagers or in their early 20s — are slender, stylish and soft of voice, and will smack anyone who questions their femininity or asserts that, biologically, they are still males. Transgender is a term they will tolerate, and the place they call home, Father Braxton says, is probably the only homeless shelter in New York specifically for transgender youth.

The shelter is called Carmen's Place and was named after Carmen Solis, a missionary who started a youth outreach program at St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in Astoria, where Father Braxton was

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A Place for Transgendered Youth

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Robert Stolarik for The New York Times

Michelle on a street in Jackson Heights, Queens, where she works on weekends. She said that she was beaten by a group of young men last year.

Video



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A Place for Transgender Youth
The Rev. Louis Braxton Jr. runs a homeless shelter in Queens for young transgender men wanting to pros...

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the pastor. After the church closed in February for financial reasons, Father Braxton, 50, rented a nearby two-bedroom apartment above a clothing store on a section of Steinway Street lined with hookah shops and ethnic food stores.

While there are a few shelters for young gay people that are open to transgender youth, the residents at Carmen's Place, who usually find out about it through word of mouth, say they feel more comfortable being with others who share similar experiences.

The shelter runs on a shoestring, relying on donations from supporters, but it is still a struggle to pay rent and buy food, Father Braxton said. He and a small staff of volunteers help prepare the meals and try to turn the residents away from prostitution and persuade them to go to school or find a job, and help them find a place to live.

Father Braxton strongly disapproves of the prostitution, but he says kicking residents out for peddling their bodies would only make things worse. So as they leave the shelter dressed in skimpy outfits, he reminds them that the shelter door is locked from 2 a.m. until sunrise and leaves them with his standard parting wish: "I hope you get arrested."

"That's the only thing that stops them — at least for a few days," he said. "These kids have been kicked out of the other gay youth shelters in the city by breaking rules and curfews.

We're their last hope. I can't throw them back on the street."

Father Braxton does have rules. No sex with customers within five blocks of the shelter. Sex with shelter workers is forbidden, and sex with other residents is strongly discouraged.

The residents take hormones — often bought illegally on the street — to develop breasts and hips and to deter masculine traits like Adam's apples and whiskers. Then there is the endless mirror time. The shelter's many wall mirrors are so important that they have been given names, like Sheila and Beulah.

"They're very concerned with appearances," Father Braxton said. "They're looking for someone to say, 'You're beautiful, I love you.' "

This same need is part of what compels them toward prostitution, he said. "To them, their only asset is their bodies, and their only coping strategy is to sell themselves for sex."

During a conversation at the shelter, Princess added, "I like the attention; it makes me feel loved."

Father Braxton asked, "You really think these men love you?" Princess did not answer.

The residents spend a lot of time on their looks. They search their gray metal lockers for the right combination of cutoff tops, tight dresses and miniskirts or hot pants. They go shopping and get their hair and nails done. Cellphones ring constantly with calls from strange men.

In the early hours of a recent Sunday, Michelle, Kelly and Princess talked with various men on 76th Street near Broadway in Jackson Heights. They disappeared every so often, for what they later said were brief sexual encounters.

Michelle, 19, said she was born Michael Carver and grew up in a small town in Georgia. She said her mother was a drug addict, so she was raised by her grandmother, a Jehovah's Witness. By high school, she began dressing more and more feminine.

"I was born male, but I was meant to be a woman and I am a woman," Michelle said. She recently returned to Georgia for her grandmother's funeral and had a tearful reunion with her parents, who had to get used to her new name.

"At first my mom rebuked me in the name of Jesus," she said. "Then she said, 'Whatever makes you happy, you do it.' My dad said, 'If you really want to be a woman, be the best woman you can be.' "

Michelle is 6-foot-4, and in high heels is hard to miss, leaning into traffic on the street. Michelle said

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she was beaten by a group of youths last year while working and after that she refused to leave the shelter for two months.

The residents brag about making money, but they rarely seem to have any, Father Braxton said. Often, he added, they offer free sex, their clients refuse to pay or they quickly spend their money on clothing, nails, haircuts and shoes.

Kelly, 17, who refused to provide her given name, described growing up in Harlem and being beaten by her mother and raped by a male neighbor when she was 13. "I hate my life because I'm so unhappy I wasn't born a woman," she said. "So I'm trapped in a man's body, but I ain't a man. I was born a boy and now I'm a woman who likes men." Kelly said her mood generally hinges on how good she thinks she looks.

"Sometimes I look in the mirror and hate what I see," she said. "I don't believe in God, because if there is one, why didn't he make me a girl?"

Princess, 18, said she was born Tyrone Gonzalez and grew up in Jamaica, Queens. When she was 9, she said, she was raped by a relative. With her mother in jail for a drug offense, Princess says she was in and out of foster homes and juvenile detention. She has been working the streets since she was 13, both for the money and the feeling of being wanted.

Gianni would not talk about her life. Skye said she was from a suburb of Washington and arrived at Kennedy International Airport last year with no money. She would not discuss the many scars on her body and arms.

Terry Holt, 21, says he does not always think of himself as a woman. He said he was kicked out of a shelter for gay youth in Manhattan because he would wear nothing but a pink tutu. He grew up in Wisconsin, he said, where his mother worked as a stripper and had a string of abusive husbands and boyfriends.

"I learned from her," he said, "Finding guys on the Internet and using sex for money."

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