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## Youths' 'springboard to the community'

*New non-profit hopes to create virtual community of support*  
by Matt Comer . Q-Notes staff

CHARLOTTE — The history of the LGBT movement is replete with examples of queer men and women who turned their difficult, youthful experiences into a drive to create a better world for themselves and others. Josh Starnes is aiming to do the same.

With the help of his friend Ashley Larson, Starnes has taken his difficult past and redirected his pent-up energy into creating Seeds of Purpose, a non-profit organization that will head up the development of the forth-coming GayandOK.com.

Starnes and Larson describe the website as a one-stop shop of resources and support for LGBT or questioning youth.

"What we want to do is help kids to create a vision for what they want in their life ... and help them create a roadmap of where they are now, where they want to go and how they are going to get there," Starnes told Q-Notes.

Larson, who first got involved with the project after meeting Starnes, said she was shocked at just how incomplete resources and support are for LGBT youth.

"In the heterosexual community you have no clue what gay people are going through. It just doesn't occur to you," said Larson, who is straight. "As I got to know Josh more and started to know more about his experience, I realized and was sickened by the complete lack of resources that were out there."

Starnes said his coming out experiences as a youth in a small, rural North Carolina community were painful and difficult. "I ended up trying to live someone else's life or trying to numb myself from the negative backlash," he said. "There was no road map or mentor for me, trying to figure out who I was and how to come out."

Larson and Starnes believe their work will most benefit kids like Starnes once was. For many youth, especially in rural areas, finding resources and support organizations can be difficult. Even if resources exist — as they did in Starnes' experience — taking advantage of them sometimes seems too

dangerous or visible.

"The gay just spilled out of me," Starnes said of his coming out experience, comparing it to a breaking dam. "There's a more constructive way of achieving that and coming out of the closet, becoming okay with it yourself and then letting your parents become okay with it. I was absolutely blind to the fact that it would be painful for my parents too."

Because he had no mentor and no road map, and certainly no positive, openly gay role models, Starnes' experiences taught him that he had only three life options — become a hairdresser, die of AIDS or become a drug addict — and that he could only live as an openly gay man in cities like New York, San Francisco and Los Angeles.

After moving to South Beach and living what he described as a "circuit party lifestyle," Starnes said he realized he didn't have to live a life that wasn't his. His sexuality didn't have to control his life or desires. Being a rural,

North Carolina farm boy and an openly gay man weren't mutually exclusive, after all.

"I love you" was something I really needed to hear in my coming out process," Starnes said.

"These youth are a demographic that's completely ignored," Larson said. "It brings about a vicious, self-perpetuating cycle. It's trial by fire and only if you're lucky, you get through it unscathed. As these generations of youth get to be adults, this becomes a problem."

Starnes and Larson hope that GayandOK.com will offer the encouragement, support and resources for youth who see no other options for their lives. "I love you" will be a focal point of their support, they said.

The organization's first website phase will feature a single resource with helpful links to community organizations and other websites. Describing the initial site as a "springboard to the community," Starnes and Larson said GayandOK.com will eventually develop a blog, chat forum, online membership capabilities and a sizeable, archived library of LGBT resources, news and other writings. The site has a tentative launch date of Sept. 1.

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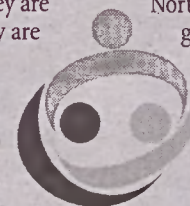
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