

Person of the Year: Steve Bentley

Service and leadership at Time Out Youth forged with passion, dedication

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Time Out Youth executive director Steve Bentley (l-r) with youth member Loan Tran and youth services director Laurie Pitts.

A native North Carolinian, Steve Bentley grew up in North Wilkesboro. It's a small town in the state's western Piedmont, an hour away from Boone to the West and Winston-Salem to the East. Perhaps it's that small-town, close-knit upbringing that shaped Bentley's sense of family, an evident passion that extends far beyond traditional notions of the word and that has allowed many Charlotte LGBT youth to call Bentley a mentor, role model and teacher.

It's a role Bentley says he didn't foresee himself taking when he was younger, setting off on a path that led him to a successful 28-year career with First Union and then Wachovia. Though Bentley has no children of his own, he does have two younger siblings and four nephews. A couple of years ago, Bentley found himself assisting one of his siblings and, in the process, spending a great deal of time with her two teenage boys. His relationship with them then and in years prior helped forge the experience he'd come to rely on when asked to become TOY's interim executive director in the summer of 2008.

At the time, the organization found itself wrapping up the loose ends of an internal controversy that eventually spilled out into the community. In this newspaper and in various social circles, allegations that the group's executive director at the time, Janine Eustache, had relatively little experience with LGBT issues or youth were raising eyebrows. In time, Eustache became a lightning rod and she eventually resigned, though for many of TOY's young people, trust had already been broken and the damage done.

In response, Time Out Youth's board and the newly-hired Bentley, who was brought on as a full-time director several months later, set out to reshape the organization. Bentley was asked to undertake a strategic study to assess the organization's various needs from financial and staffing operations to youth concerns and programming.

"My objective when I came [to TOY] was to accomplish three goals: To repurpose, to rebuild and to restore confidence in the organization, and I think we've done all of those," Bentley says.

Bentley reports that the organization has built an expense reserve and is standing on solid financial ground. Bentley says he and TOY's board members have striven to increase transparency and trust. They regularly attend other community organizations' events, reach out to existing and potential donors and supporters and answer questions and concerns whenever they arise.

Indeed, TOY has experienced revitalization. In Bentley's more than two years at the helm of the group, TOY has continued to implement its three-year strategic plan focusing on community visibility, youth engagement and financial stability. TOY has increased its regular youth programming participation and extended their youth service director's hours. The result is almost full-time coverage by a professional social worker. TOY's bounce-back has been most recognizable, perhaps, through the organization's partnerships with other community organizations and its successful school outreach initiative. In the past year, TOY has reached out to school principals, teachers, counselors and social workers and built relationships to increase Charlotte students' access to LGBT-inclusive programming. TOY has also worked with Campus Pride, the Lesbian & Gay Community Center of Charlotte, the more mainstream Crossroads Charlotte and a slew of other organizations.

There's no doubt Bentley's leadership, coupled with the dedication of TOY's board and other staff, have brought the organization back from the brink of distrust it experienced two years ago. Bentley has been at the forefront of that change, both in behind-the-scenes partnerships and publicly in several mainstream media outlets. Such leadership, especially on the eve of TOY's 20th anniversary, has secured the organization's continued place and importance in the lives of this city's youth and the greater LGBT community.

In recognition of his overwhelming dedication to TOY and the health and well-being of Charlotte's LGBT youth, *qnotes* is proud to name Steve Bentley our 2010 Person of the Year. ::

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