

2.1 IT'S A KIKI...

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Introduction

The Kiki Coalition is a group of LGBTQ+ youth-serving agencies in the five boroughs of New York City. The coalition meets monthly to identify opportunities for collaboration in serving LGBTQ+ youth in New York City. This case study will briefly describe the Ballroom Scene, the Kiki Scene, and the history and purpose of the Kiki Coalition, including the ways in which its members work to create safe spaces for LGBTQ+ youth of colour who come from underprivileged and underserved communities and often experience homelessness.

The Ballroom Scene

The house and ballroom scene/community is a multigenerational, autonomously organized community created originally by and for Black and Latino/Latina LGBTQ+ people. It functions as both a source of social support and as a creative collective. The history and legacy of the Harlem drag balls has been traced by numerous historians and cultural commentators to the notorious drag ball culture of Harlem in the 1920s and 1930s New York, preceded by and coming out of the great migration of African Americans from the southern part of the United States to the north. These drag balls, in many ways, were created as a safe haven for the Black queer population in Harlem, and grew out of resistance to homophobia.

The modern house and ballroom scene was established in 1967 in response to racism in New York's drag ball circuit community. Between 1968 and 1973, ballroom houses were created. A 'house' is a socially configured kinship structure (Arnold & Bailey, 2009). Houses may also be called families, and they provide a home (sometimes literal, sometimes figurative) for their members. Houses are led by an appointed mother and/or father representing the House, and include a collective of other members called 'the children.' House parents provide guidance for their 'children' of various ages, races and

ethnic backgrounds. The first three houses were Labeija, The Brooklyn Ladies, which became The House of Dupree, and The House of La Wong. At present, most houses have chapters throughout the United States (Arnold & Bailey, 2009) and internationally.

Balls are events in which people come as both spectators and participants. A particular house or house representative hosts them and participants compete for cash prizes and trophies in a variety of competition categories. Balls typically involve fashion runway categories, voguing, and performances that transcend gender and sexual identities. Participants have the opportunity to walk in particular categories and win trophies. The more one wins, the more elevated one's social status within the community (Lemos, Hosek, & Bell, 2015).

The Kiki Scene

A subset of the mainstream house and ballroom scene, called the Kiki Scene, was created just over 10 years ago. Kiki is a ballroom term, meaning something to be taken lightly or something done as a joke. Kiki houses and Kiki balls began as less competitive versions of the ballroom scene. The Kiki Scene was created out of a need for a youth-only space that was more economically accessible and less competitive for youth. The Kiki scene mimics the Ballroom structure, but is led by young people in collaboration with community-based organizations and service providers. The Kiki Scene provides access to HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment information and services, personal and professional development assistance and a sense of peer-led community support. The Kiki Scene's population is majority (85 to 90%) African American and Latino American LGBTQ youth between the ages of 13 and 29. There are 10 to 15% of youth from other ethnic backgrounds who also participate.

Kiki Coalition: Mission and Program Philosophy

The mission of the Kiki Coalition is to provide safe spaces for LGBTQ+ youth where they can connect with their peers and allies and celebrate one another's diverse range of talents. Along with safe spaces, we support youth by connecting them with mentors and providing leadership and personal development opportunities for members of the Kiki community through the Youth Leadership Council, internships, community groups and other character-building activities related to salient issues including, but not limited to, social justice, education, and health and wellness.

A lot of the youth participants access services from multiple organizations involved in the Kiki Coalition. Many of these organizations receive funding from the same sources and have grant-related targets to reach in a specific time period. Instead of fighting over youth participants, we share the resources, since our goals are all ultimately the same. Linkage agreements are in place between organizations to help ensure we can effectively collaborate, and that young people's service needs are being met. All these organizations are familiar with the variety of services provided by member organizations, and are therefore better able to refer young people for appropriate assistance. For example, if a young person shows up to one organization and they are hungry and unable to access food, we know where to refer them for dinner and snacks. Similarly, if a young person needs clothing or wants to hang out and enjoy fellowship with other liked-minded teens or LGBTQ+ youth in general, we know where to send them. The same is true for young people who need medical treatment, those who are looking for work, young people who are experiencing homelessness, and young people who want to talk to a counsellor. The Kiki Coalition sees positive youth development as a foundation for building upon the resilience, talent and empowerment of LGBTQ+ youth to be stewards of not only their own personal life trajectories, but also the wellbeing of the communities they are from. We see a world without the structural and social inequalities that currently affect the health and wellbeing of LGBTQ+ youth. This world will be achieved by invigorating the Kiki community and empowering its members to live proudly with themselves, and to be able to make a lasting difference in the world.

Our Core Values

Pride

We believe everyone deserves a life in which they feel proud of who they are without fear of or experiencing discrimination and maltreatment, particularly as it concerns one's sexual orientation and/or gender identity and expression.

Resilience

The house and ball communities have thrived despite undergoing immense hardships, and we hope to support this same strength to support self-determination and for participants to live happy, productive lives.

Safety and Wellness

We believe everyone should have a safe space where they are free to express themselves and thrive with excellent physical, emotional and mental health.

Allyship

As a coalition of organizations working with a historically oppressed community, we believe our role is to support and aid the community and serve as allies, with a relationship founded on accountability.

Social Justice

We understand the intersectionality of many issues LGBTQ+ youth face in their daily lives, so we support social justice on every level and for everyone, regardless of race, religion, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, or any other basis for wrongful discrimination.

What does the Kiki Coalition do?

In addition to coordinating services for LGBTQ+ youth, we also host events that provide youth opportunities to express themselves as whole people, however they identify on the gender and sexuality spectrum, and whatever their race and housing status. Because we are a collaborative of social service organizations, many of the youth we work with are either experiencing homelessness or are precariously housed. It is important that young people experiencing homelessness also have supportive spaces where they can express themselves.

One of the ways we enact our values is through the four events we host for LGBTQ+ youth aged 13 to 24. Through these events, we provide opportunities for youth to become leaders in their community—if they are not already—and to express themselves in healthy and holistic ways. All events are always free for the participants, and have a theme and a community spirit component to them. All the events hosted by the Kiki Coalition allow youth to participate in the planning and implementing of such events, gaining experience and building leadership skills through the KiKi Coalition's subcommittee called CoLAB (Community Leaders Advisory Board). For example, youth have participated in every aspect of the World AIDS Day Ball, from coming up with the categories to helping promote the event. The World AIDS Day Ball, also known as the RED Ball, is of paramount importance in the Kiki scene for many reasons. One important reason is that

it pays respect to our brothers and sisters who have died. During the event, a moment of silence honours those we have lost to HIV/AIDS, as well as those we have lost to violence. Anyone who was known and passed away is recognized at this event. Secondly, the ball is an opportunity to promote HIV testing and emphasize to youth the importance of knowing their status. Our mission is enacted through the RED Ball because we want to help every young person be healthier, have stronger self-esteem, and experience being in a place where they can be their true authentic selves. Young people are able to showcase their talents while gaining information about the services and supports that are available to them through the Kiki Coalition. Organizations usually have a table at the Ball, enabling young people to meet an organizational representative, learn about the organization, and receive items that they may need, such as water bottles, condoms or backpacks. In 2016, 550 young people attended the RED Ball.

Our summer event is Youth Pridefest, which provides another opportunity for youth to showcase their artistic talents. Young people sing, dance, or perform poetry in a supportive environment. Like the RED Ball, Kiki Coalition organizational members have a table at the event as a way to engage with LGBTQ+ youth and inform them about available services. We work very closely with different houses in the Kiki scene and with the leaders of those houses (i.e., the mother/father of the house), encouraging them to engage their house members not only in the events, but also in the services provided by the organizational members of the Kiki Coalition. Youth Pridefest typically draws around 350 youth. In 2016, we created a different theme called Field Day: KiKi Wars, which kept the competitive spirit of the balls, but engaged the youth and houses in different outdoor activities such as tug-of-war, relay race, voguing musical chairs and a host of other fun, creative and challenging games.

Expectations for Membership in the Kiki Coalition

The Kiki Coalition currently has 17 active organizational members. It is sometimes challenging to maintain engagement by all 17 organizations, due to organizational staff turnover. The short-term nature of nonprofit social service staff positions, due either to burnout or funding limitations, makes consistent representation from all organizations difficult to maintain. We are hoping to work with our organizational representatives on succession planning so all 17 organizations can remain engaged, even during staff turnover. Our member organizations include homelessness services, social support services, health

and HIV services, employment, arts and culture, academic enrichment, and our city's department of health. Our expectations for organizational members include:

- The baseline level of mandatory support is a donation of \$250 monetary or in-kind, to support “Youth Pride, which is primarily organized by member organizations of the Kiki Coalition-sponsored events.
- Participation in monthly Kiki Coalition meetings, which are hosted at the various member organizations on a rotating basis. Meetings are held on the third Wednesday of each month, generally lasting 2 hours between 1:00pm and 3:00pm.
- Participation in no fewer than one but no more than two Kiki Coalition subcommittees.
- Participation in mandatory Kiki Coalition-sponsored events, as chosen by the Kiki Coalition board.
- Adherence to guidelines established by the Kiki Coalition with respect to planning and execution of events attended by youth.

Conclusion

The Kiki Coalition is a model for community organizations that want to work in tandem rather than in competition with one another. We recognize that coordination is not always easy. Large caseloads, many administrative tasks and staff turnover can make this work difficult. However, we are all working toward the same goal—making sure the youth in our communities are safe, healthy and have the ability to express themselves holistically. It is our belief that we, as organizations, should share that responsibility. After all, we are developing the LGBTQ+ leaders of tomorrow, and coordinating services across organizations helps us to do that better.

References

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About the Authors

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Tina Jones aka TJ identifies as a young Lesbian Woman of Color. She obtained her B.A. in English at Marymount Manhattan College and is currently working on her Masters. TJ currently works at HEAT (Health and Education Alternative for Teens) in Brooklyn, a part of SUNY Downstate Medical Center, as the LGBT Outreach coordinator. TJ does an array of services for adolescents and highly enjoys working for young people by mentoring and empowering them.

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Jermine is a native New Yorker, who once worked in Corporate law but had a change of heart and a passion for giving back to his community. Jlin wanted to see youth thrive and started volunteering at the Hetrick-Martin Institute (HMI) before they realized what a great asset he would be and how much the youth adored him. It was there he started his position and grew to be an amazing youth advisor to many of the young people who grace the doors of HMI. Often called Mother, Jlin is very well respected and considered a comedian to most staff and youth alike.

