Episode 1: Gender-Affirming Care on Chicago's South Side - A Dignified Life Podcast

0:05

Host: Hello, I'm Dashae Engler, the Editor-in-Chief of Urban Plains, and this is a Dignified Life podcast, a three part episode where I talk about gender affirming care. I got the name after doing some research on Brave Space Alliance or BSA for short. BSA is a black trans led organization in the South Side of Chicago, helping people get their gender affirming care. And they're also our very first guest.

Gender affirming care is a range of medical, mental health and social support services that align people with their gender identity. I want to be one of the essays values they engrave in their work is dignity, the ability to be respected, protected, and honored authentically from their four pillars of dignity to a room they dedicate to dignity.

But I'm getting a little ahead of myself. These three episodes are not just about gender affirming care, but they're more about the people that are actively trying to protect themselves and live a dignified life. In these episodes, I'll be talking to an Illinois organization leader, a trans woman who lives in Illinois and an Iowa organization leader.

Illinois has earned a reputation as being a progressive state with their shield laws and the protection that makes it a place for people to travel for gender affirming care. In some ways, it has become a safe haven for trans people. For this episode, I will be talking to Aicha Chehman, the community manager for this episode. For this episode I spoke to Chehmani, the community engagement strategist for BSA, to talk about their organization.

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Host: One thing I found interesting was the four pillars of dignity, the housing, the food, the identity, can we start with that?

1:42

Guest: Absolutely I will just go down the list. Our food pantry has two weeks of grocery twice a a month. We have a lot of fresh produce, eggs, milk, meat, etc.. And I think one thing I think about the pantry is the amount of name brands that we keep in there. We also provide things like vegan options, kosher, etc., and trying to keep it accessible for a variety of dietary needs when it comes to doing things with dignity, we think having those name brand options, we all have a go so that it looks like anyone else is super important.

And then for health, we provide HIV testing. We also have an onsite behavioral health manager who does wellness check ins with folks, big me up, meet with her up to up to three times. And

then as far as our identity pillar, we have our dignity suite or people can access food, clothing, gender affirming items, makeup, etc.. But also things like our barbershop for free haircuts twice a month. Our transformation Tuesday is free makeup and beautification services once a month, as well as things like name change clinics, etc.

And then for housing, we have like our housing readiness program and we offer financial literacy workshops, tenants rights workshops. We also just opened our DJ Alexander House earlier this year, and are now about to welcome our second cohort of residents.

So we kind of had a little bit of everything and mixed in there is up side things like handing out bus cards, one off services that come in sometimes and things like that.

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Host: Yeah. So what I found interesting about a lot of your content, it focuses on like being in the South side of Chicago and it's very, like everyone typically knows the South side of Chicago, but don't really know the South side of Chicago. So why is that important when it comes to your branding to talk about that as one of your strong identities?

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Guest: So all Chicago is an incredibly diverse city, is also an incredibly segregated city in a lot of P.O.S., communities have been pushed and segregated further south in the same breath. There's not a lot of support for queer and trans people of color in general, and so all the LGBT centers are based very, very far north.

Still, all the wonderful organizations that we collaborate with all the time and have partnerships with. But there is kind of a gap in resources for folks of color who live, you know, pass thirty-fifth, who can't hike all the way up to Lincoln Park or wherever it is to access things. And so we really try to bridge that gap by being kind of a wraparound service center where people can get almost everything they could possibly need just here in our center. But we also have the option to refer people externally if necessary, something that we don't offer.

4:30

Host: When it comes to like Illinois, Illinois is pretty progressive. So I wonder, do you guys get any funding from Illinois?

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Guest: Yes, there are a lot more protections for queer and trans folks in the state of Illinois, which allows us to do the work that we do with less restrictions. And as far as funding, we have a lot of private grants, some state funded grants. So we personally don't rely a lot on federal funding. The only federal funding that we have was affected for us was for our HIV programing. But we all just like to fundraise through our Dignity Dash 5 K this past August and can make that money up.

So yeah, there's a lot of ways you can just apply for grants from this like other organizations that are reliant on the government. And that's kind of how we functioned and primarily just because things fluctuate in the world. So yeah.

5:30

Host: Do you guys support people outside of the state or do you guys, since you're such a small group, do you just focus on the South side of Chicago?

5:38

Guest: We focus on the South Side of Chicago, but we do have people come from out of state all the time, particularly like Indiana's nearby. I think we have a few participants who come from over there. That's part of the closest. Yeah. We have people that come from Indiana and like other surrounding Midwest states for specific kinds of services.

5:58

Host: So I kind of I'm also interested in respectability politics when it comes to getting funding from the government since you live in a progressive state. Do you feel like there's a specific way trans people feel the need to perform in order to get these in organizations? Or is it more like you don't have to worry about that because you live in a progressive state.

6:21

Guest: So it's not that we don't have to worry about it as much as we weren't relying on it in the first place. It's like we have well, I think we've noticed among all the things happening in our country right now is really, really aggressive support from the community. And so it's like, well, we're not getting funding from certain areas. The people of Chicago have stepped up as far as the way we've increased in donor support for things like our swipe for things like our five K, etc. has kind of made up for that and it's always been empowering.

Instead, like I feel like we have been like brought down by anything going on in the world or we're just like motivated because no matter what's going on, we know that we have folks who are like backing us and charities are showing up for our events and resharing our resources when they can. That's kind of where I feel like we're at with that.

7:15

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Missouri Sports fans. Are you ready for sports betting to be legal? Are you ready to place your bets in the Show Me State? I'm Amanda Barboza. The visual editors of Urban Plains. And my story does the legalization process and all the drama of making sports betting come to life in Missouri. Get all the details so you're prepared to place your bets beginning on December 1st,

2025.
Check out the story now on Urban Plains.
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AD

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Host: You guys have been around since 2017, right?

8:02

Guest: Yes, we yeah, we were founded in 2017 and we used to kind of exist within Center on Halstead. And we were able to get our own physical space in South Side and we again, to bridge that gap in 2022.

8:22

Host: You kind of answered this, but I think it's really interesting to like, point out to like the accessibility when it comes to even like state funding because there is state funding.

But then we need these like localized centers as well, because just because there's gender affirming care in the state doesn't necessarily mean that people necessarily have access to it. Would you agree with that?

8:32

Guest: Yes. I think that again, like I was saying, with the way certain resources are spread out throughout the city, there's getting to them, knowing how to use them, having the literacy to use them as well.

I mean, you go to a doctor who hears all these things, you sign, here's all these words. What do they need? And so it's just like without having someone to help talk you through some of these resources. Also, it also makes it harder to not just first, you have to know they're there. You have to be able to physically get to them. And then you have to understand how to use them.

And I think that it's one thing that we try to make a bit more accessible here at BSA where it's like we know we're working with people with a range of different experiences coming in and trying to keep resources accessible. And we all have those one on one conversations to talk people through things so that they can better access and understand what's available for them as well.

9:31

Host: When I say a dignified life, what do you think that needs?

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Guest: Having your needs met in the way that is affirming and makes you feel seen. I think with particularly trans people of color, we are often actively trying to be raised right now, and it's even harder when you are food insecure or unhoused or whatever else it is, and also trying to exist as yourself.

So having the option to come into this space and not only be respected for identity where, how, whatever you want, be respected by whatever name pronouns you want to use it. Also to be able to get that fresh bag of produce and whatever else, whatever else you need just makes you feel dignified. It empowers you to also pursue other things because now you feel uplifted. It's a lot harder to apply for a job for the first time or go after your dreams when you're also hungry.

10:32

Host: Well, we're out of time, but thank you so much. I really appreciate you coming and talking about your organization. Is there any last thoughts, Anything you want to say to the people?

10:46

Guest: Yeah. Support Brave Space Alliance. Follow us on Instagram, The Brave Space Alliance. Sign up for our newsletter. Volunteer with us, as always to get involved. And also, don't be afraid to use our resources. While we are centered around the LGBT community, we are open to all.

And if you are hearing this and you're like, man, I can afford groceries this week, or I really need a new shirt for that interview or a new pair of shoes or I don't need a free barber, I have to be able to get a haircut and forever. Please swing by. We're walkin no questions asked.

11:21

Host: Thank you for listening to my first episode. I hope you learn something new. Sometimes it's hard to tell if the progressiveness of the state is pushing us forward or the people in it that's making the difference.

Maybe it's a little bit of both, but I choose to pick the latter of the two. Chehmani and BSA are doing foundational work for the people of Chicago and we wish them the best. Let's keep an open mind, stay learning and love each other. I’m Dashae Engler and this is Urban Plains.