

Queer youth find safety mid-air



Abby Hylton dislocated her knee while trying to avoid sitting on her cat while stretching at home. She still helps her students, Jace (center) and Sarah (top), learn a new aerial move from the ground though. (Staff photo by Grant Masini)

By Grant Masini
Staff Writer
The Carrboro Commons

“Yes! Just like that! Now just let go and fall backwards.”

Under the eyes of her teacher and fellow classmates, Abigail Stern took a deep breath, relaxed her body, and let go of the ropes that seemed to be her only form of support 10 feet in the air.

But suddenly the hint of fear in her eyes disappeared as she held the hanging position and realized this new move wasn’t as hard as she thought.

Abby Hylton, 26, teaches Fluid Revolutions, an aerial dance class for queer youth in Chapel Hill and

Carrboro. The class is one of several programs organized by the Youth Community Project (YCP), a grassroots nonprofit that engages and creates safe spaces for local teens.

“One summer I was struggling with some mental health issues, and I needed to do something active,” Hylton said. “I wondered if you

could do trapeze in the area, so I searched online and found out you can — so I started, loved it, and now I’m teaching.”

Hylton said Fluid Revolutions is way for teens to hang out with other queer youth that has space for political discussions, but isn’t centered on them like some other queer youth organizations.

“It also provides a space where people don’t have to worry about their pronouns being respected,” Hylton said. “They can feel free to engage in physical activity and artistic expression without that fear.”

Christine Abernathy, managing director of YCP, said encouraging that expression is what YCP is all about.

“If youth aren’t interested in sports, they can kind of fall through the cracks,” Abernathy said. “We provide space for them to feel affirmed, where they can start their own projects that they’re actually interested in.”

Stern, a senior at Chapel Hill High School, will attend Agnes Scott College in the fall, after participating in various YCP programs for over a year. She said that YCP means different things to different people.

“I’m involved in several of the programs, but there are lot of other things I’m not involved in that seem

really cool, as well,” she said. “I’ve been given a lot of responsibility and power in YCP programs, and my opinions have been listened to and respected, which, as a youth, is awesome.”

Stern also participates in Queer Youth Drop-In, another program

Finding the organizations:

Teen Center
179 E. Franklin St.
Chapel Hill, N.C. 27514

Flowjo Dance Studio
100B Brewer Ln.
Carrboro, N.C. 27510
(enter using the ramp adjacent to the street).

Carrboro Arts Center
300-G E. Main St.
Carrboro, N.C. 27510

run by Hylton. Every Friday night at the Teen Center from 8 to 10 p.m., queer youth can come and have a place to hang out with one another in a safe space

“There’s no commitment whatsoever,” Hylton said. “It’s a casual space — sometimes no one shows up and sometimes 15 people show up. It’s a toss up.”

The Ups and Downs

Hylton, Abernathy and Stern all said the biggest challenges to YCP and similar programs are accessibility and organization around the teens’ schedules.

“With all youth programs those are the biggest challenges, but the great thing is you can come and make it what you want it to be,” Stern said. “We’re the ones deciding what it looks like so we can make it whatever we want. If there’s something you want to do we can make a safe space for that.”

Hylton said the best experience for her has been seeing students in Fluid Revolutions engage in aerials as an art form and a physical outlet. The program encourages the students to show off their skills to others, as well.

Fluid Revolutions is preparing for a performance on April 30, at 7:30 p.m. at Flowjo, an open space for training sessions and performances of motion in Carrboro.

“With some help from me, the students choreograph their own pieces, and we use the proceeds to raise scholarship for the camp,” Hylton said.

Fluid Revolutions started last summer in the form of a weeklong camp, where Hylton combined learning aerials with political workshops. Hylton said they discussed gender, sexuality and intersexuality, among



Stern, shown practicing with silks, said she hopes to see YCP grow in size and diversity. (Staff photo by Grant Masini)

other topics, topping it off with a showcase for friends and family of the students. The next camp is set for the week of Aug. 8, 2016.

Hylton said she wishes Fluid Revolutions were something she had access to, as a teen.

“I think aerials has been really helpful for me, in terms of coming to terms with my own body, and has been really helpful for me to come out to myself about my gender identity,” Hylton said.

“Once you’re in the air and you’re upside down and you can’t tell what’s up and what’s down, you have to really figure

out what part of your body you’re moving,” Hylton said. “That just translates to how you feel about your body, gender and sexuality.”

Teens interested in becoming involved with YCP and its programs can contact the organization’s Facebook or come to programs, such as Queer Youth Drop-In.

What’s Next?

Youth Community Project’s next event is their second annual art auction, which will feature art by local teens.

The show is Friday, April 8, from 6 to 8 p.m. at the Carrboro Arts Center.

“Once you’re in the air and you’re upside down and you can’t tell what’s up and what’s down.”

- Abby Hylton,
Fluid Revolution Instructor