American Airlines Newsroom

NEWS RELEASE

A special prom night for LGBTQ youth in Chicago

6/20/2019

The Chicago-based PRIDE Employee Business Resource Group partnered with Center on Halsted to plan and produce an inclusive prom night for young adults in the LGBTQ community.

It's prom night at the Center on Halsted in Chicago. The dancefloor is full, the music is bumping and more than 100 young adults are living for a night to remember. The intent behind this particular prom celebration is special. Most of the prom-goers identify as LGBTQ, and they're getting a chance to experience an authentic prom night and celebrate their diversity in a safe place without judgment, labels or stereotypes.

David Cox, an American Airlines Flight Service Manager at Chicago's O'Hare International Airport (ORD), understands how important this prom is to the Center on Halsted's youth program. Cofounder of ORD's PRIDE Employee Business Resource Group (EBRG), David has championed a strong relationship between American and Center on Halsted for more than a decade. He also knows the grim reality of this group: Most teens in the program are experiencing homelessness, and some may have been kicked out of their households because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. But this prom night gives the teens a chance to escape all the pressure and be themselves.

"This is their evening. We are here for them," David said. "I am walking around to make sure everyone is having a good time. I want the community to know that American Airlines is here with diversity. We are here for everyone, and we love to celebrate our differences."

David, along with dozens of American team member volunteers, planned the event for months. The PRIDE EBRG handles everything from decorating the room to cooking and serving the meal. They held a clothing drive to provide outfits for the prom, and team members throughout the airport donated formal dresses, suits, jewelry and shoes.

Organizers promoted it through word of mouth, and, in its second year, attendance doubled.

Greg Storns, Director of Youth Services at Center on Halsted knows almost everyone in the room by name. Knowing most of their history and what the teens have been through, he gets emotional at the sight of them laughing and dancing. “The opportunity to have fun, dress up and eat a hot meal was not previously available to this group,” Greg said. “This is 100% thanks to American Airlines for collecting the outfits and doing all of the planning. There is no way we could have otherwise pulled this together.”

Center on Halsted’s youth program offers seminars and development opportunities for young people who identify as LGBTQ. The center is a safe and nurturing environment where young adults can access the care and resources they need to have a successful future.

A widely known safe haven on the north side of Chicago, more than 1,000 community members visit the Center on Halsted each day. Although they focus on the LGBTQ community, they also value LGBTQ allies who do not identify as LGBTQ but support equal rights for everyone.

John Elton, an LGBTQ ally and former member of the youth program, had nowhere to live after serving in the United States Air Force. He said the center helped him with important things like obtaining identification documents, finding shelters and anything else he needed to get back on his feet.

John credits the Center on Halsted with getting his life back. He’s moved on and just had his first child, who he brought to the event.

> “This is prom. We get to dance, eat and be together. I was here with a lot of them and we’re like family in a way. I appreciate that I can be here and be different but still part of this community.”
> — John Elton

Teens enjoy a special prom night at the Center on Halsted.

David Cox, kneeling in the middle, with American team member volunteers at the prom.