

# Youth Work Snapshots

**Oasis Center**  
**Nashville, Tenn.**  
**(615) 327-4455**  
**www.oasiscenter.org**

**Objective:** To help disadvantaged youth in the Nashville community move past their problems and develop leadership skills.

**In a Nutshell:** Oasis Center was founded in 1969 by a group of neighbors to assist young people who were experiencing some of the negative side effects of the 1960s social and cultural upheavals. It now operates 13 different initiatives encompassing crisis intervention, assistance to youth who have run away or are homeless, school-based prevention services, and opportunities for youth to volunteer and lead. The four primary programs are its crisis services, transitional living for homeless or foster youth, family and youth counseling, and leadership development.

**Where and When it Happens:** The center is based in Nashville, and operates programs that range in frequency from daily to weekly.

**Who Started It and Who Runs It:** Oasis Center is led by CEO Hal Cato; its 13 programs are staffed by 44 salaried and 36 hourly staff members. Last year, more than 475 people volunteered for the organization.

**Obstacles:** "Setting up an evaluation process that measures and determines the value of Oasis Center's philosophy and approach has been a problem, and is one we continue addressing today," Cato says. "While most youth programs track data that reflects a decrease in negative behaviors, that data doesn't reflect a young person's well-being or sense of connectedness."

Oasis developed its own methodologies and database to track progress in four impact areas: youth being safe; youth being connected with caring adults; finding opportunities to participate; and promoting the concepts of generosity and justice. The database is being tested and will launch this spring.

**Cost:** The yearly operating budget for Oasis is \$3,022,000.

**Who Pays:** Funding comes primarily from federal grants (17 percent), state and local grants (29 percent), and private foundations and individuals (32 percent). Foundation supporters include the Mary Reynolds Babcock, W.K. Kellogg and Frist foundations.

**Youth Served:** The majority of youth come from metropolitan Nashville and surrounding counties, although there are no geographical

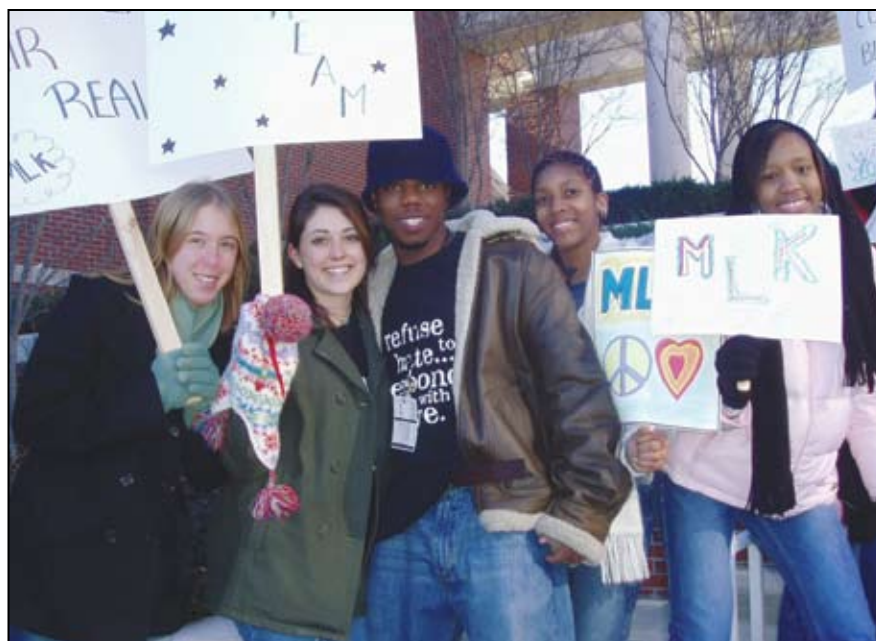


Photo courtesy of Oasis Center

**FROM AT-RISK TO IN CONTROL:** Oasis Center uses civic engagement activities, such as public demonstrations, to help youths emerge as leaders.

boundaries to the services. Services are primarily available to youth ages 13 to 17, but that age range is extended to 21 in the case of homeless youth. The youths' demograph-

ic breakdown (about 35 percent white, 35 percent African-American, 6 percent Hispanic and the rest "other") roughly mirrors the city's overall mix. About three-quarters of the

youth come from low-income families.

**Youth Turn-On:** Potential clients hear about Oasis "mostly from peers," Cato says. "That we're using youth as our key spokesmen is a big turn-on. They see our kids leading in a big way and say, 'I can do that.'"

**Youth Turn-Off:** "Changes in staffing can be hard for youth to accept, especially if the new staff person doesn't live up to their expectations in some area," Cato says.

**Research Shows:** While the evaluation remains in its testing phase, Oasis has garnered attention for some accomplishments. For example, one of the two high schools it serves credited the nonprofit with helping to double the number of seniors accepted into college in 2006. Oasis Center was named this year's agency of the year by the National Network for Youth.

**What Still Gets in the Way:** Many youth have to travel a modest distance to the program. "Since Nashville has a limited public transportation system," Cato says, "this is a barrier for many youth."

—John Kelly

## MY JOB

### Rosco Kickingstone

GLBTQ Peer Outreach Worker  
 Peace for the Streets by Kids  
 from the Streets, Seattle,  
 Wash. (206) 726-8500  
 www.pskks.org

**Age:** 21

**Salary:** \$8.50 an hour

**About PSKS:** The nonprofit, headed by Director Elaine Simons, provides such services as job training and drug intervention for local homeless youth and young adults. In accordance with its bylaws, half of the organization's staff and half its board are made up of representatives from the homeless community.

**His Job:** Kickingstone has worked at PSKS since May 2006, and serves as the organization's face on the street to gay youth. (According to "An Epidemic of Homelessness," a recently released study by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute and the National Coalition for the Homeless, between 20 and 40 percent of homeless youth identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender.)

Kickingstone goes to the main

office to pick up lunches and donated supplies – such as toothbrushes, gloves and hats – and distributes them to street youth while initiating them in conversation. For those interested in getting help, Kickingstone will discuss the services at PSKS.



Rosco Kickingstone

**Best Part of the Job:** "I love inspiring people

to follow their dreams and their hearts, and do what they're put on this planet to do. I'm really happy when I see people come in after not having seen them for a month, and they got clean and got a job. Their whole essence changed, they're just, like, shining."

**Worst Part of the Job:** "Having to pass up a kid that you really want to help, but knowing that they're at a point in their life where you can't touch them."

**Memorable Moment:** All of the agencies that advocate for the homeless in King County get together once a year for a one-day effort to count and document the homeless population. Afterward, PSKS hosts a squatter slumber party. When Kickingstone went in at 3 a.m. last year, "There were close to

40 people sleeping on the floor. To see all those kids. ... A lot of them I hadn't even seen before. And, I mean, I'm out there every day."

**Why Seattle:** "Even before I got old enough to understand what homelessness was, I heard Seattle was sort of a homeless Mecca. There are so many services [available here] that people come here because of it."

**Queer and Homeless:** "When I left home [in Bosal, Wash., near Lake Washington], I came out to the city and was couch surfing for awhile. I was never into the street scene, because I didn't feel comfortable. Especially being queer; when you're queer on the streets, you can't really be out about it. ..."

"I'd say probably at least half of the kids here I know that are queer are on the streets. A lot of queer youth are on the streets for coming out and getting the boot from their parents. With hetero street kids, it's usually having problems with drugs or fighting with parents."

**Outreach Strategy:** "I don't really have a game plan when I go out there, just kind of play it by ear. In my experience, before anyone can help somebody, that person has to want to help themselves. So if I get the impression they just want socks, I don't really bug them about coming to the center."

—John Kelly