

LiA Showcase- OCAY- Nothing About Us Without Us

By Grace McWilliam

"Equality means more than passing laws. The struggle is really won in the hearts and minds of the community, where it really counts." – Barbara Gittings, US Activist

"I am proud that I found the courage to deal the initial blow to the hydra of public contempt." – Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, pioneer of sexology and modern gay rights movement, in 1867 became the first queer people in German history to speak publicly in defence of queerness to the Congress of German Jurists

Embarking on the Leadership in Action (LiA) phase of the Laidlaw Undergraduate and Leadership Scholarship program, I had the pleasure of working with Older Citizens Advice York. This is a small, local charity which offers a free, confidential advocacy service to people over the age of 50. I developed an LGBTQI+ inclusion toolkit for them which consisted of: recommended inclusion guidelines as substantiated and accompanied by a 53 page academic report, a training video for volunteers, posters, blog posts and flyers. I am confident I have developed an extensive and cohesive kit to facilitate their ongoing inclusion efforts. In this showcase I will detail the challenges, highlights and personal growth that marked my LiA experience.

A Rocky Start and Lessons in Resilience

Initially the project started off shakily. In the first week it became apparent that there was a difference in expectations and understanding of my role within the charity. Swift communication, some rapidly sent emails and several meetings, and the guidance of my main contact within the charity and my scholarship lead, Mel, were instrumental in overcoming this hurdle and an understanding was reached. Admittedly, this was somewhat demotivating and led me to question my abilities and worthiness of attaining the scholarship. It would be somewhat of an understatement to refer to this early period as a crisis of confidence. Yet, as time passed and I undertook more research and engaged with more LGBTQI+ people in York my passion quickly returned. This early setback became a foundation for a key theme that would define the entire project: resilience.

The ability to resile became a significant factor that guided me through the LiA process, challenging preconceived notions of my own abilities and highlighting the importance of adaptability in leadership. While uncertainties arose, I learned to navigate through them, accepting some factors that were beyond my control and focusing on my capacity to respond to challenges effectively.

Building Confidence Through Action

The LiA journey became a profound exploration of self-worth and confidence. Wrestling with doubts about my capabilities and the significance of my work, I realised that my confidence and my perception of my self-worth is intrinsically tied to how I perceive the quality of my work output, whether or not this is reflective of reality. This realisation, while challenging to come to terms with, has become a catalyst for personal growth. Idealistically, I believe everyone holds their own innate value which is immutable. Yet, I struggle to apply this belief to myself. From my perspective, a key part of developing the resilience, determination and confidence that creates a great leader is being able to trust that you have a naturally existing value which can't be stripped away by making an error.

Through the process of this LiA I learnt several valuable lessons. Primarily, there is a very good reason why academic reports are produced by multiple people. Furthermore, I also managed to challenge myself by engaging in environments which I find very challenging and anxiety-inducing.

This project forced me out of my comfort zone. I would find myself hopping from zoom calls with the main organisation, to a phone call with a local LGBTQI+ organisation, to discussing my direction and findings with my peers in the community. The research element of this process also furthered my affinity and deep respect for the LGBTQI+ trailblazers who ensured a better quality of life and societal acceptance for people like myself.

Reflection

While this project was at times a labour of love, I look back upon my time working with OCAY with fondness and I am incredibly proud with the personal development I have undertaken over the course of the LiA. I doubt I would have reached the finish line without the support from my Laidlaw peer group, the UoY Laidlaw leads and the main man himself, Dan Brittan, Advocacy Manager at OCAY and the rest of the brilliant team (Danni and Abi). The team at OCAY exemplified compassionate, focused and ethical leadership practices which I aim to reflect and carry forth. I was also inspired by the work of OCAY to continue pursuing my goal of heading into NGO work professionally after having some career doubts. I have also decided to continue developing my leadership skills by undertaking the Oxford Ethical Leadership Project.

While the completion of this project marks the end of my time undertaking the Laidlaw Scholarship, it also marks the start of potential local impact. As I eagerly anticipate the influence of the LGBTQI+ toolkit in the local community, it is thrilling to think that my work can have an impact and if it allows even one individual to feel more included, comfortable and able to access advocacy services I qualify that as a success. I am incredibly grateful to have been given the opportunity to contribute to positive change and look forward to (hopefully) continuing my leadership journey in the field of NGO work.