

TRANSGENDER FOCUSED CLOTHING DRIVE

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A Senior Honors Project Presented to the

Honors College

East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for

Graduation with Honors

by

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May, 2022

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The Conclusion of the Trans-Focused Clothing Drive

Over the last two semesters at East Carolina, I've been pursuing the organization and execution of an event that came to a heading on March 31st, 2022, being a Transgender-Focused Clothing Drive. In short summation, the drive was a large success, due in part to the many participating students and community members who donated clothes and took clothes on the day of, and as the semester draws to a close the rest of the clothes will be finding a new home through donations to an LGBTQ-friendly recipient in hopes that every shirt or pair of pants will help someone with their presentation.

This endeavor started as a sort of rumor. After becoming involved with Intercultural Affairs through volunteering with the Dr. Jesse R. Peel LGBT Center, I had heard through the grapevines that there was always a small sort of conversation that aired around a clothing swap potentiality. For the longest time, I wasn't sure why there hadn't been, as the demand was certainly there around the time that I started asking around. In actuality, it was understandably a large endeavor to undertake, what with getting and storing donations, spreading the word, and actually going through with the event. That, coupled with an unforeseen and sudden global pandemic threw the idea under the bus for a while. However, as we moved towards living in a world attuned to a sudden pandemic, I still realized that this idea was feasible on a much smaller scale initially. This led to the first clothing swap that I approached Jessica Melowski with (Jessica being the assistant director of the LGBT Center at the time). As it was the peak of COVID around the same time, we kept the clothing swap between volunteers in the LGBT Center, and it worked as a mild success. It was very small, but it worked out and several volunteers got a couple of new wardrobe pieces that they seemed to enjoy, and I

realized that this idea was certainly doable on a larger scale. Bolstered by this, I approached Jessica initially with the request of being my mentor on this project, and after making her co-mentor along with Mark Rasdorf, director of the LGBT Center, as my main mentor, I was all set to start on this project.

The first phase of any good project was to research the topic. I set out to my favorite search engine to investigate if any other places had done a similar idea to this clothing drive, only to find that it's been done in other places with a different focus. While I was aiming for supporting the trans and non-binary community around ECU, there was a solid point from a sustainability perspective that I hadn't realized at the time, and that sort of added to the endeavor's idea. Regardless of intent, the idea was still viable, and even though I'd be trying to navigate this idea in a far different time, COVID was starting to let up on its iron grip around ECU, which was very reassuring. Additionally, as a center assistant for the LGBT Center, procuring the space for the drive went very smoothly. Mark was very open to the idea of me using the center's conference room for the event, and the date was picked out far ahead in advance, set for the Transgender Day of Visibility in the next semester.

Unfortunately, as Jessica left the center on maternity leave and announced her subsequent resignation, the project hit a roadblock. Originally, Jessica and I were planning on meeting frequently to discuss the project, but with her absence it felt like I was left to the wolves, so to speak, and had to figure the clothing drive out for the large part on my own without a hand, which in hindsight was a sort of blessing in disguise. It was unfortunate to not be able to get constant feedback and advice on the clothing swap idea, but it allowed for me to really be the one to drive this project forward.

I started to meet with Mark to move this project forward and receive critical advice on it, later also reaching out to Rose Bogue, the program coordinator of the LGBT Center and one of my long term close friends, and with their advice, the project made incredible headway in a very short amount of time. Not only that, but I also met with one of the earlier Honors groups who had a similar vision to what I had in store for the future. Between all three sources, some of the project would be revamped and pivoted to better fit what it had become. I changed from hosting a clothing swap to hosting a clothing drive, as I felt swap implied that you needed to bring something to take something when I really just wanted to give trans and non-binary individuals clothing access. I also set up a small donation bin on campus around a week before the event started to direct early donations to in the off chance someone wasn't able to make it to the event proper. I got in contact with the social media manager of the center, Elliott Hickerson, to spread the word about the drive, and I brought the event up at the center's weekly discussion nights of *Coffee House*, where I knew many of the students were trans and non-binary, and from there on it was just a matter of actually doing the event.

So the week came, and I was nervous all week. This was a big thing, everything I'd been doing for the last several months was all coming down to that Thursday. Everything was planned, the bin was ready, the date was set, I was just nervous from the pressure of the situation, but who wouldn't be, honestly? Regardless of my anxieties, I woke up the day of the event and went to the center, got everything set up, and announced the event at the luncheon that day. In addition, Mark lent a hand by sending a small announcement out on the center's mailing list, and I reached out to every campus organization and community that I had access to. Finally, it all culminated together into...



... what felt like a perfect event.

Of course, it wasn't perfect, not by any stretch, but I was not expecting the turnout and support that I had gotten. There were a ton of clothes that came, a ton of clothes that went, and many clothes left to go to trans and non-binary students. I went in with a surprising amount of clothes and received steady donations throughout the actual event, but at the end of the day when I was packing everything up into the original donation bin where I received a huge chunk of clothes, I managed to fit everything leftover into the bin for donating.

Throughout the event, I heard from many of the staff that work around Intercultural Affairs that it was a cathartic result to see this happening and being successful. The Center for Leadership and Civic Engagement brought up maybe wanting to make some sort of a closet for students around campus similar to the Purple Pantry, and I feel satisfied in knowing that maybe this is a project that could happen every year if it gets to that point. Ultimately, though, it was nice to see all the work pay off in an event that did what I set out to do. As someone who identifies as non-binary, I wanted to give clothing access to other trans and non-binary students so they wouldn't have to

struggle in the ways that I had struggled with clothing in the past. This event did exactly that, and I couldn't have been happier with how it turned out.

The days after were spent on finding a suitable home for any of the leftover clothes that were donated. Originally, the idea was to donate the remainder to a local LGBTQ-friendly source near Greenville, but there's not really an overwhelmingly accepting place around Greenville that doesn't have some sort of hang-ups. I got into contact with Jeannette Debs, one of the organizers for the PFLAG chapter here in Greenville to see if they're accepting of the clothes, but they simply didn't have the room. After a little bit of research done earlier in the semester, I've settled on taking the clothes out to the LGBTQ Center of Raleigh on a day trip sometime in the middle of May for their closet. I would take them sooner, however, the center is currently going through some reorganization, which makes donating clothing tricky.

If I had to describe how I felt about this event after it was said and done, I think I'd just use two words: "beyond satisfied". I came into this event expecting the absolute worst because of latent anxiety, but when everything came together it all worked out in the end in the most relieving and euphoric way. It was fantastic to see all the hard work pay off, and I can't stress how much I appreciate everyone who helped with the event, from the endless advice from Rose and Mark to even the littlest contributions from some of the donors. The event was fantastic, and if I could do it again next year, I think I absolutely would. The payout was, without any shred of a doubt, worth all the pain and stress.