

# **St John Youth**

## *Emerging Diversity and Inclusion*

St John Youth Leader Amy always told the cadets she worked with that nothing they could say would shock her. But she was proved wrong when a 15-year-old in the programme confided that they were going to start transitioning from female to male.

“Thankfully I managed to maintain my chill face, as the kids would say, and hide the rising panic just long enough,” Amy says, recalling the conversation. “Our journey began that day.”



St John Youth is programme designed for six to 18-year-olds and offers first-aid training, competitions, events, camps, community projects and social activities. The Penguin Programme caters for six to eight-year-olds, and the Cadet Programme is open to eight to 18-year-olds. There are 6000 cadets from Kaitia to Invercargill, supported by more than 1,000 volunteer youth leaders and the Regional Youth Manager team.

Many St John employees started their careers as a cadet, including some of the current Executive Management Team.

Most St John cadets develop a gender identity that matches their biological sex, says Diversity, Inclusion & Belonging Lead Cat Valentine. “But for four per cent of young New Zealanders this binary model does not reflect their developing sense of self.”

The organisation’s leaders identified they needed specialist training to support cadets who were in that group. It started as a one-off for Amy’s division but developed into an ongoing relationship with Rainbow Youth.

The Regional Youth Managers and any Youth Leaders with 'out' gender diverse youth have attended specialist training facilitated by Rainbow Youth to ensure they are supporting the young people appropriately. Printed resources from Rainbow Youth have been made available to all groups.

Another 110 Youth Leaders have received more general training from Rainbow Youth.

Cadets can wear a uniform that reflects their gender identify, not their sex, and the organisation plans to have gender-neutral uniforms in the future. It’s simplified the process for changing a cadet’s name in its system and will re-issue certificates under their preferred name.

St John Youth is currently undertaking consultation on gender-diverse dorm rooms and bathrooms at camps and is looking into introducing a Diversity & Inclusion badge for cadets.

There will also be a cadet seat on the wider organisation's Diversity & Inclusion Council.

The cadet in Amy's division transitioned to living openly as a male.

"We developed plans for things we could predict but other scenarios caught us off guard. By far the easiest part of the process was the acceptance by his fellow cadets, who embraced him and affirmed his identity," she says.

"There were people who initially struggled with the changes we put in place we continually focused on supporting him and doing what was right."

The cadet went on to be the Regional Cadet of the Year, was awarded The Grand Prior Award (the highest award other than for bravery that St John can bestow on its cadets) and was even CEO for a day. He is now studying health science at university.

St John Youth are aware of at least six other cadets who are currently transitioning. The education and systems put in place have given Youth Leaders the confidence to nurture these young people safely.

"Research shows that trans people are at very high risk for poor mental health, self-harming and suicide attempts. Unfortunately, as the emergency ambulance service in New Zealand, St John is acutely aware of this statistic," says Cat Valentine.

"By opening the door to our gender diverse youth, the Cadet Programme will help prevent their families or friends having to open the door to our ambulance officer in the future."

"It's important for the cadets to be empowered to take the lead and teach us too. These young people are the future of St John... future paramedics, 111 operators and even CEOs. The story we tell them now about the organisation will be with them for life. Thankfully the story they are hearing is that everyone is welcome and valued at St John."

The changes in the Youth Programme have also benefited the wider St John workforce. Inspired by this work, the organisation invited staff to participate in a sexual orientation and gender identity survey. The results showed that while many people are comfortable to be their whole selves at work, it wasn't the case for everyone. A large percentage of people identifying as 'gender diverse' were not 'out' at work.

This prompted many staff to share that hadn't realised that what they thought were harmless jokes in the workplace may have been hurtful and they would be more aware in the future. St John has created a toolkit 'Being an upstander, not a bystander' to encourage staff to callout potentially offensive behaviour in a low-key professional manner, and a Rainbow Network has been set up to allow staff to connect and seek support.

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TOOLS OR RESOURCES TO MAKE  
YOUR WORKPLACE MORE INCLUSIVE

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or call 0800 DIVERSITY (348 377)