Thanks so much to Marcia for that wonderful introduction and to Chip Perry and everyone here at Time Out Youth for inviting me. I’m honored to be here celebrating this momentous platinum anniversary with all of you, and I guess I’m just generally glad you exist. I could have used an organization like Time Out Youth back when I was a budding little homosexual growing up in Detroit.

Can you guess which one is me? The opportunity to spend time in the company of other gay kids, to openly discuss my struggles with caring and supportive confidantes, and to feel like I wasn’t the only one enjoying those collaborative onanistic rituals at sleep-away camp as something more than a normative phase of adolescent bonding would have gone a long way toward helping me come to terms with, and internalize, my sexuality, instead of ping-ponging about in a quasi-secretive (and then explosively obvious) fashion throughout my late adolescence. Also, if I’d had gay friends, or at least an openly gay audience, in high school it is unlikely that I would have been able to get away with this absurd haircut for as long as I did.

One of those bitches would have read me out. I will say, by way of explanation that it was the mid-80s, and that without any skill or talent, I cut my own hair, so this nimbus that appears to be spiraling off of my head like some brooding Jew-froed thundercloud was both pioneeringly avant-garde as well as the best I could do.

Of course, as Ms. Cherilyn Sarkisian made apparent in the *late* 80s, we can’t turn back time, so there’s nothing any of us can do now about my hair, or my tortured youth. But as adults, I believe we can offer something useful for the LGBTQ youth of today. And I’m not talking about posting videos onto the Internet informing some amorphous concept of “young people” how great things are going to be at some point in their future.

Not to harsh too much on the idea of the It Gets Better campaign—which I think has succeeded in demonstrating support for the issue in a very public way, and generally has its heart in the right place. But, speaking as an expert in child development, I’d just like to point out that the adolescent brain—with its underdeveloped frontal lobe—does not have the most sophisticated capabilities in terms of projecting past the proximal and the immediate. Teenagers thus, are not particularly concerned with the future—this is why they fail so consistently at things like risk prediction and conceptualizing the repercussions of their actions, and why they excel at things like making rash decisions that result in the kind of disastrous consequences that seem patently obvious to any reasonably sentient adult. They are concerned almost exclusively with the present. So talking to them about the future, while ostensibly admirable, makes about as much sense, as a proscriptive *solution*, as trying to cure malaria by talking to mosquitoes about hygiene.

So what *can* we offer? Well, in a word, uncling. Gay Uncling to be precise. I’ll show you what I mean. Raise your hand if you *are* a Gay Uncle, *or* if you *have* a Gay Uncle. Or a Lesbian Uncle. Seems to me that just about every hand went up. Which makes sense because no less an authority that UrbanDictionary.com—your source for elucidation on the meaning of everything from Alabama Hot Pocket to Zulskoni…Trust me, you don’t want to know—defines the word thusly:

Gay Uncle: “You either have one, or you are one (or both.)”

Why uncling? Well let’s consider the intended goal—what it is, exactly, that we want to help accomplish for today’s LGBTQ youth. Much of the recent media focus has been on the horrifying and dare I say epidemic, subject of bullying, and so it seems relevant for us to focus our energies on protecting our youth from being harassed, making it safe for them to be themselves, and providing them with tools to craft an appropriate response to their ensuing anxiety, enervation, and despair. Yet too often, our focus is on addressing the outcomes or attempting to mask the symptoms, and not confronting the broader issues required to defeat the disease. It’s the TheraFlu defense: if you take enough of it, with enough vigilance, you won’t feel anything. But underneath: you’re still sick.

To wit, the official response to this situation of bullying (where there’s been anything you can call a official response) as with many issues we confront here in America—from skateboarding injuries to snow removal—is a reactive one, based mainly on creating allegedly shielding legislation or providing the most cursory educational opportunities. Not that I have a problem with additional legislation; it can be a useful part of a unified approach. But one-off educational initiatives tend to be relatively ineffectual, especially with young people. I’ll give you a concrete example. As some of you may know, in addition to kids, politics, and pop culture, one of my other areas of writerly expertise concerns cars and the auto industry, so I’ll draw from that realm. I definitively support laws that mandate the inclusion of safety devices like seat belts and airbags in vehicles as a useful step in preventing fatalities. But it would also be helpful if we actually taught people how to drive in a sensible manner and continued their driving education beyond the single point when they receive their license at age 16. It is no surprise that per-capita traffic fatalities are two to three times as high here as they are in Europe, where they have fewer safety standards, but much improved and ongoing training.

So how does being a Gay Uncle provide a wide-ranging net of educational outreach that protects our vulnerable youth from assault (while simultaneously solving the crisis of texting while driving?) I’m going to answer that question. But in order to do so, first we have to rewind a bit and delve into exactly what a Gay Uncle is, and does.

Recent scholarship suggests that had Abel, kindly—and buff—shepherd that he was, survived the murderous wrath of his evil brother he would have become the world’s first Gay Uncle. Instead, that role fell to Endora’s prankster brother Arthur on *Bewitched*.

But, in all seriousness, gay uncles were placed on this earth for a reason—and that reason is not solely to help teach our nephews how to groom their eyebrows, or take our nieces accessory shopping at Claire’s (as fun as that may be.) In fact, recent scientific studies have suggested that Guncles have a relevant, unique and evolutionarily-supported role in child rearing. Paul Vasey, an Associate Professor of Psychology at the University of Lethbridge in Canada, has authored a series of articles, most recently in the journal *Psychological Science*, describing his research among the Samoan fa'afafine (men who have sex with other men).

Vaesy’s studies examined altruistic behavior among various demographic segments involved in raising kids—parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles. And he discovered that gay uncles’ altruistic behavior toward their nieces and nephews—their willingness to do things like babysit, pay for school, purchase presents, or teach skills—was extremely high. Higher even than that of their straight male or female siblings. In fact, it was so high, that the Guncles likely played a significant role in enhancing their young relatives’ chances for survival. In fact, some of Vasey's previous Samoan studies showed that families with gay uncles have more offspring than those without—suggesting that our assistance and expertise may actually enhance our female relatives’ abilities to breed successfully.

So the existence of Gay Uncles appears to have a scientifically founded evolutionary precedent—and I know we’re in the South here, so I want to add the caveat: for those of you who believe in evolution. But what are the origins and intentions of the Gay Uncle from a cultural perspective? Well your opinion may differ, but I like to believe that the popularization of the Gay Uncle in contemporary culture is something for which I’m personally responsible. (Don’t believe me? Google the term and see what comes up.)

I’ll explain. But in order to do so, I’ll have to rewind about fifteen years, back to when, instead of working as a celebrated celebrity journalist, and professional homosexual, I was a lowly classroom teacher. The lowest of the low, in fact: a preschool teacher, perhaps one of the most undignified, under-appreciated, and underpaid jobs in America. My career as an early-childhood educator culminated in a five-year stint as the teacher/director of a struggling, full-day, 100 year-old preschool in Manhattan’s East Village. Half of this job obviously entailed hanging around with a bunch of three and four year olds, crawling around on the floor and working on our tans.

But the other half of the job, particularly at first, entailed hosting open houses and tours for prospective parents. During these events, it was my job to tell moms and dads about how we did things at the school. I’d let them know that we used simple open-ended materials, that we served healthy snacks that included fresh fruits and vegetables, that we took weekly field trips using public transportation, and that we listened to disco and disavowed weapons play. But at some point, someone would always ask about the school's “educational philosophy,” looking, I imagined, for popular catchphrases like “traditional” or “progressive.” In my initial attempts at responding, I would talk at length about my various pedagogical influences—outlining Gardner’s theories of Multiple Intelligences, and Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development, and the block building curriculum of Caroline Pratt. The parents’ eyes would glaze over as if I were their least-favorite brother-in-law describing the rarest elements in his beer-can collection.

Eventually, I hit on a solution: Whenever this question of educational philosophy came up, I would simply answer, “Gay Uncle.” The neighborhood parents—a sampler-pack of urbane hipness that included musicians, midwives, bar owners, bartenders, sword swallowers, architects, social workers, and strippers—immediately understood what I meant. A Gay Uncle was someone who adored kids while they were in his care, but didn’t have children of his own; who existed outside the mundane and often debilitating day-to-day act of child rearing; who had a pragmatically external perspective on familial dynamics; and who would be appropriately indulgent and fun without becoming mired in potentially destructive, limit-limiting emotions such as paternal disengagement or maternal guilt. Applications and enrollment soared.

As I relaxed into this label, things changed with my dealings with the kids as well. I’d always been out—to the parents—so that wasn’t an issue. But I began to feel more confident about incorporating that part of myself into what we call the culture of the classroom. When we talked about our weekends, I would be sure to make reference to hanging out with my *boy*friend, Tal, and when we did a unit on families, I made sure that they understood that Tal and I and our collection of distressed furniture and English transferware comprised a perfectly valid one. Pushing the boundaries a bit further—into territory that would now get me arrested in Tennessee—when I was reading stories aloud to the kids, I would occasionally change the genders of the characters, so that instead of a pair of male and female piggies or owls falling in love and getting married at the end,

I’d have there be a pair of boy piggies, or a pair of girl owls falling in love and getting married—though why anyone has to get married at the end of a book aimed at four year olds is beyond me, but I thought: if it was going to happen, I was going to make sure that my own validity as a human wasn’t being undermined in the process. Also, I hired other queer teachers to work at the school, because there’s safety in numbers. And not to stereotype or anything, but they tend to be much more fun. Plus if you want to hire *any* male teachers in early childhood, chances are, they’re gay.

What is the point of all of this? Well, by being these kids’ surrogate Gay Uncle, I created a layer of awareness and understanding and acceptance in their lives, one that impacted on them at the time, and one that they continue to carry with them. How do I know this? Well, because I’m still in touch with many of them—they’re in high school, or college now. We text or chat on Facebook, we go out for dinner or to see movies, or we occasionally watch *Glee* together.

I have three anecdotes that prove my lasting influence as a surrogate Gay Uncle. The first involves a boy named Ellis. When he was around five and just learning to read, Ellis was walking around his neighborhood with his mom and saw a poster for the upcoming New York City Gay Pride parade on a bus shelter, and after he sounded out the first word—*G-A-Y. Gay—*he turned to his mom and asked what that meant. Struggling to find something concrete to use in her definition, she said, It’s when two men or two women love each other. You know, like Brett and Tal. Ellis’ eyes lit up. “Brett and Tal?!” he shouted. “Count me in!” The second involves a girl named Amber. One day, when Amber was about 7, she became aggravated with her friends on the playground because they were hassling two of the girls in her peer group, trying to prevent them from playing wedding together. “Two girls can’t get married,” they kept saying. Eventually, Amber reached a breaking point, and planted her feet. “Two girls *can* get married,” she said. “It’s called gay. Get over it.” The final example is more recent. I was having dinner with my former student Ariana, who’d just returned from a trip to Europe to visit some Danish friends. She was talking, quite eloquently, about the combative form of masculinity she’d witnessed among her male friends here in the U.S., and contrasting that with what she saw as a more open and communal affection among her friends overseas. “If those boys came here, everyone would think they were gay,” she said. “But boys being loving toward each other—regardless of sexuality—isn’t necessarily gay. It’s just human. No one should be opposed to boys giving each other backrubs.”

What does all of this have to do with helping LGBTQ Youth? Well, surveys and studies have shown that knowing and connecting with a gay person, personally—having a gay friend, or relative, or neighbor, or teacher—is the single largest indicator of someone’s holding a positive (or *more* positive) attitude toward LGBTQ issues. That is, if you have a personal connection with an actual Gay, it is much more difficult to demonize others solely on account of their orientation, and easier to evoke empathic feelings. I know this is true of my family member’s kids—despite the fact that, when given the opportunity to make a movie with us last summer, the eldest, Hannah, scripted a dark comedy called “The Niece,” about a girl who comes to stay with, and murders, her two gay uncles.

Perhaps it’s better to stick with the changes I engendered with my students. I’ll give you another specific example from my young friend Ellis. When he was in middle school, there was a queeny boy in art class, a kid with whom he wasn’t particularly close. Over the course of a few days at the start of the year, Ellis witnessed the kid being harassed by his peers in the halls between classes, and he was uncertain what to do. Finally, one day, the confrontation, while not physically threatening, escalated. Ellis could see that the boy was scared. Ellis isn’t tough, or a fighter, but instead of walking away, he put himself in the middle of the situation. “My uncles are gay,” he said to the bullies. “So if you want to get to him,” he gestured at the boy being teased, “you have to go through me.” In other words, he stood up for this kid, based in no small part on his affinity with us. And because that connection made the infraction, instead of something that could be overlooked, into a personal affront against his inherent sense of justice and humanity.

If we want to make the kind of lasting social change that is going to protect our vulnerable youth, and allow them to be who they are—who they were born to be—they definitely need to have a sense of recourse, an idea that the people in power—their parents, their teachers, their principals, their pastors—are abiding laws and rules and strictures put in place to protect them. In the world of political theory, that’s called hard power: top-down power that exists through coercive means, like legislation. But attitudinal change, the kind that comes—bottom up—through co-option and attraction is more likely to be fostered through personal connections, via what we call soft-power. This kind of transformative power is derived not simply from acting as a mentor or role model for LGBTQ youth themselves, but from forging meaningful connections with *all* youth. And, if the aforementioned Urban Dictionary definition is to be believed, we Gay Uncles are uniquely poised to exert this soft power: we’re plentiful to the point of being nearly ubiquitous, creating something of the exact inverse of Herbert Hoover’s Depression-era plan to put a chicken in every pot. In other words, if *everyone* has a gay uncle—every gay kid, every bully, every fence sitter, every observer, every cheerleader, quarterback, burner, goth, dipshit, dork, and weirdo—their knowledge of, and connection with, us is bound to make a profound impact.

But in order for this to happen, they need to have knowledge of and connection with us. I know that I’m lucky to be able to be an out gay man in both my personal and professional life, without suffering negative repercussions. Not everyone has this privilege. And I know that, as gay uncles, our parents and siblings can often be the *least* accepting of who we are. But that’s the beauty of what I’m proposing. The people of our generation, and the generation above us aren’t the direct target of its intent. The generation below us is. And kids will generally accept anyone who treats them with respect. I know that kids are noisy and messy and unruly. And, in my opinion, the impossibility of their accidental arrival in a gay man’s life—no matter how many times we have sex—is one of the great pleasures of being a homosexual. You might dislike, or be barred from, or just choose not to deal with your nieces or nephews or “nieces or nephews.”

But on an evolutionary, and social, and societal level, it’s your job. And it’s an important one. You’re the sly voice of reason. The sensible adult perspective that is loving and caring, but decidedly not parental. The person who will tell kids what they need to know, without taking a lot of B.S. And you are, notably, a profound force for social change. But only if you do your job.

We’ve got a word in English, one derived from the Latin, that’s used to define the literal relationship between a man and his sister’s kids. That word is Avuncular. But the term can also be used more loosely to describe the idea of behaving in a way that offers outreach or guidance to someone younger. Well, we’re creating a new word right here today to describe the profound and life-altering movement for social change that’s derived from the connection between a gay man and his sister’s kids—or his friend’s kids, or his students, or anyone of the younger generation with whom he happens to come in meaningful contact and make a human connection. We’ll call it Gavuncular. And all it takes is being your true and honest self with the young people in your life, whoever they are. It’s not an easy job. But if we want to make this world a better place for our youth, and I think we do, I encourage you, and all of the other Gay Uncles you know, to do your part, and Get Gavuncular. Thank you.