

After 48 years counseling homeless youth, Debby Shore can't quit



Debby Shore has won national awards for her work with young people. (Photo courtesy of National Network for Youth)

Debby Shore grew up in a Pittsburgh house filled with music and books. The bookshelves, even crammed full, didn't have enough room for all of the volumes, so stacks sat in front of the bookcases.

Shore was a precocious reader, picking up sociological texts before she could even understand them. One book in particular—"Tally's Corner" by Elliot Liebow, about a group of Black men who hung out on a Washington, D.C. street corner in the early 1960s—stood out to her.

"It looked at this society not as deficient, or pathological, but sensible. It just struck me how incredibly important that was," Shore, 74, said.

The book's lessons became Shore's guiding principles when she founded Sasha Bruce Youthwork at age 26 in 1974, an organization that provides homeless youth services in the Washington metro area. The organization renamed itself in 1975 after the late diplomat David Bruce's daughter, Sasha, died by a gunshot wound.



Sasha Bruce Youthwork began when Shore started counseling unhoused young people and out-of-town runaways in Georgetown and Dupont Circle. (Photo courtesy of Sasha Bruce Youthwork)

Shore became passionate about amplifying young people's voices in college, as the Vietnam War raged on. For her, there was always a connection between politics and social services.

"Charitable work has sometimes had a limited view of people. But young people have the capacity to develop skills and transform their own lives," Shore said.

Shore's faith in her clients and seemingly boundless energy captured other people's attention quickly.

"I loved Debby right away," said Ginny Hughes, a former clinical director at Sasha Bruce. The two met shortly after Shore's son died of cancer. "I knew that Debby was suffering but there was still a way in which she found joy and could connect. I don't know if I would have been able to do that."

Shore's son died when he was 16. Her other son named his own child after his brother. "You always regret not spending more time with them," she said.

She worked through her mourning and became a "thought leader," in youth homelessness advocacy.

“She’s just such a dynamic leader,” said John Crain, a consultant and Sasha Bruce’s board chair, who met Shore nine years ago when he volunteered to help the organization develop a four-year strategic plan. “Her influence is really felt across the country, in helping shape many communities’ understanding of the underlying causes of youth homelessness.”

Shore viewed her relationship with the young people Sasha Bruce serves as a partnership.

“We help as navigators. And where things don’t exist, we create them. You create ways of working with people that are strength-based, that really help people to change,” Shore said.

Hughes said that Shore’s work was very much part of who she is—but it was not the only part of her. “She’s a damn good dancer, and she’s cute as hell. She’s up for anything, and that’s the kind of person who will start an organization like Sasha Bruce at 26,” Hughes said. “But mainly, she’s cute as hell.”

Shore is looking toward the future, wondering what she needs to do to make sure she feels good about moving onto the next chapter of her life.

“Of course, it will have the imprint of someone else, and it has the imprint of a lot of other people, it’s not just me by any means. But you know, I do really feel like there is a strength, there is a foundational piece here that has become the Sasha Bruce way.” Shore said. She described the Sasha Bruce way as holistic, comprehensive and understanding of individuals’ needs.

But she doesn’t anticipate leaving social work in the near future.

“When you’re working at a nonprofit like Sasha Bruce, you’re working on the side of the angels all the time,” Shore said. “You’re living your principles. That’s a wonderful gift.”