

WHERE
ARE WE
TO GO
?

THE DILEMMA OF
BEING YOUNG
IN PORTLAND!



by W.C. McCrae

What's it like to be young and gay in Portland? Coming from an older generation and a different area I began this investigation with a certain bemused curiosity. I mean, for those of us who grew up in the late '60s and early '70s, even the notion of "uni-sex" was blandly naughty. But this is a generation for whom Boy George is now passe. And many of us who came out, to whatever degree, in the less than recent past were forced to use role models borrowed largely from literature: our concepts of "gayness" were derived not from reality but from close, frequent, and fevered readings of Isherwood, Gide, or E.M. Forster. And even this privilege (if it was one) was largely limited to males: even if young women had similar narcissistic urges to construct sexual identities at the behest of literature, the appropriate lesbian texts were simply unavailable. Our county library contained *Dorian Gray*. There was no copy of *Orlando*. But today's youth has access to real gay people as role models in the media (and AIDS will for better or worse force more

and more personalities out of the closet) and at the local level. Portland has, for a city its size, a large, overt, and visible gay presence, and has (from Mount Tabor inward) a generally benevolent attitude towards gay people. Gayness is a topic of discussion at all levels of local government, and has, to a degree not anticipated 15 years ago, been largely destigmatized.

And in Portland numerous businesses and organizations recognize in gay youth a market, if not a value and a service in mutual interaction. There are gay youth groups, night clubs, non-threatening environments in which to gather.

But I discovered that while Portland affords opportunities and freedom to gay youth that, say, the rural Mid-West did not 10 years ago, the difficulties evident among young gays echo issues in the adult gay community. The divisions — of privilege, class, gender, education — encountered in the adult community, are present in young gay culture. As adult gay issues have changed, so too have young gay issues. The difference is one of degree, not type.

SOCIAL GROUPS



Windfire was begun in 1982 as a peer support and social group for gay and bisexual adolescents. According to advisor Franklin Jenkins, the idea behind the foundation of Windfire was to give gay youth — from 14 to 19 — the same opportunities for an associa-

tion of peers as heterosexual kids have. Jenkins stresses that the young people are able to do more for each other — in terms of counseling — than he can do for them. According to Parfiet, although there is a circle of teenagers who continue to come for social reasons, Windfire also "recycles" kids. Individuals come to the group, initially concerned with coming out to parents and friends, and asking questions about sexuality. After a few weeks they will begin to offer advice and information to others who have joined later and then will leave the group, having gained whatever support they needed.

Recently Windfire moved its meeting place from OWT to the City Nightclub in response to a concern that they "hadn't been reaching the kids who go to the City." Jenkins warned Windfire that moving would change the group in ways that individual members might not like. While most Windfire members are middle class, the City clientele is quite varied, and includes some "street kids." Windfire began to deal with "street issues" — coming out to parents or employers is not a problem to those who are homeless and don't have jobs. Instead, Windfire began to deal with mem-

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tion of peers as heterosexual kids have. Windfire provides a forum where gay and bisexual youths can meet, listen to scheduled speakers, get information or advice, and discuss whatever is on their minds. Randall Parfiet, a former Windfire member stresses that Windfire isn't just counseling. For many young people to whom the City (an all-age gay night club) isn't for whatever reason an option as a social center, Windfire provides the only organized (Even respectable) milieu in which gay teenagers can get to meet and know each other.

Windfire began by meeting at Old Wives' Tales. The number of teenagers attending, according to Parfiet, ranged from 10 to 60, depending on teenage scheduling exigencies. Although there are sometimes scheduled speakers, a more common structure is to pass around a list on which individuals write

members whose problems were poverty, drugs and alcohol, which resulted from being "on their own."

The move resulted in a clash of values. For one group without The City there was nowhere else to go. But for some conservative members of Windfire, even going to The City was distasteful, and in some cases permission was denied by parents. Windfire now, resourcefully, meets at both OWT and the City.

Windfire recently spawned the Bridge Group, a peer support group for those 18-29. There is an intentional overlapping of ages between the two groups so individuals have the option of swinging between them as they wish. Most Bridge members are formerly of Windfire, though the group addresses different concerns.

Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (Parents/FLAG) provides support for gay