



## Lesbian street youth

by Cathy Siemens and Sue Smith

It's Tuesday afternoon at Outside-In. Linda and Terry walk in, looking for Barb. The bruise on Linda's face turns blue; Terry begins to shake. Last night Linda "pulled a date" that mugged her instead of paying her. No money came in for the hotel rent or today's fix. Soon they have an appointment with a doctor, a place for the night, and a hug from Barb. Linda and Terry are two of Portland's 40 or 50 lesbian street youth.

Young lesbians who have survived long enough to want to leave the streets will often go to the drop-in center at Outside-In. Barb Sussex meets them there. According to Barb, "There's something different about lesbians on the street." She explains that while many have fled violent and abusive homes, some lesbians have been thrown out simply for being gay. At Outside-In they offer a 90-day program to get kids off the street and kick their problems with substance abuse. They provide counseling, housing, and support.

For instance, Christine is in the 90-day program. Her father couldn't accept the fact that she was a lesbian. He forced her out of the house in her early teens.

An estimated 400 to 500 homeless young people live on the streets in Portland. They have been "terminated" from their families. Many fled their homes because of sexual, emotional, or physical abuse. When they hit the streets, they find a culture with its own hierarchy and laws. For security, they often join a group: the Punks, Skinheads, or Hippies. Despite attempts at group identity, there is no typical street kid. Only the laws of the street connect them: (1) revenge reigns (an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth), (2) take only what you need, (3) never rip off someone who tries to help, and (4) defend your own against outsiders. Sixty-five percent of all street youth prostitute; 80% of the girls have prostituted at least once.

Life on the street is violent. Most of the perpetrators are the "johns" and the pimps. Girls average \$300 a night by "pulling" about six "dates" or tricks. The typical john is a white businessman working downtown.

In the "day for night" world of the street, they rise at 4:00 P.M., hustle the business crowd, and catch a free meal at the Salvation Army's Greenhouse. Then they go back to work, pulling dates to get the money they need to buy drugs to get high, to pay for a hotel room so they can crash around 4:00 A.M. At 4:00 P.M. it starts all over again. Through prostitution and drug dealing, they survive. All use drugs, and 60-70% have serious drug and alcohol problems.

When Christine was kicked onto the street, she made her way to L.A. where she became an adept student of street life. Eventually, she became a successful pimp. She ran a stable



ILLUSTRATION: E. ANN HINDS

of nine women, and unlike male pimps, she treated her women well. Christine collected \$500-\$1,000 a night from each woman. Their earnings supported her luxury apartment and Corvette. When the police came down on her, she moved back to Portland. Pimping didn't pay well here, so she dealt drugs instead. Christine never turned a trick or took a drug herself. She drank instead.

Christine feels good about her future. She wants to be a cop. She says, "I like the challenge and excitement of the streets," and because she knows the streets so well, she figures she'll make a great cop.

Barb thinks that Christine's going to make it. Barb notes that it's the young lesbians who more often succeed in the program at Outside-In. "They seem to be more independent. They realized a long time ago that in order to survive, they had to take care of themselves. No one would do it for them." Besides the solidarity among all street youth, lesbians experience an additional loose bond with each other. They know who they are, and they know they like women. Barb adds, "It's hard for them to have insights into their lesbian identities. They don't have positive role models."

Bets has completed the 90-day program. She shares an apartment with a lover whom she plans to marry. Bets wouldn't relive one minute of her past; but she, too, is excited about her future. Bets and Christine haven't had an easy time getting information about being lesbians. When they found out about Stonewall and attended the Lesbian and Gay Pride rally, Bets responded, "I wish they had Gay Pride every week."

Outside-In would like to provide a library of lesbian books for the young women who use their drop-in center. Unfortunately they have no money for such an expense. The Lesbian Community Project is coordinating a book drive to stock the drop-in center library. Look for the donation can at A Woman's Place Bookstore. Your donations can make a big difference.

The lesbians who hang out at the drop-in center don't feel very connected with the Lesbian Community. But they do read *Just Out* and *Rag Times*, and they do know where the bars are. Bets liked the bars, but she's trying to stay clean and sober so she's looking for

somewhere else to go. Christine went to Windfire once, but she felt her life on the streets was light years away from high school and problems with mom and dad. Both Christine and Bets would like to be more involved in the Lesbian Community. They enjoy live music and playing pool. Both agreed, "We like meeting older lesbians who've made it."

Likewise, Barb Sussex knows these young lesbians really need positive role models like Big Sister Advocates. Advocates should feel good about themselves and have a stable living situation. That might mean a steady job or a good relationship. Barb hopes they'll introduce lesbians transitioning off the street to the Lesbian Community, and provide the extra support that Outside-In just can't do.

Like Outside-In, the Outer East Youth Service Center is part of the Project LUCK program, a network of coordinated services to street youth. Dierdre Gibson-Cairns coordinates the Big Sister/Advocate program. She can provide training on how to relate successfully to street youth.

Transitioning off the street is difficult, but Gwen, who is now 35, made it. She's in school, training to be a professional. She's happy with her lover of several years. In 1973, Gwen worked the streets. She reflects that "living in the underbelly expands one's perspectives on the world" and that "life isn't fair." Life on the street wasn't glamorous or fun. It was a spiral of abuse, addiction, and exploitation. She regrets that agencies like Outside-In weren't available for her then. She feels that an advocate would have made a big difference in the long painful process of turning her life around.

Gwen advises lesbians who want to be advocates (1) to have worked through their own addiction and abuse issues, (2) to want to assist rather than rescue, (3) to be prepared to be tested, and (4) to understand that the street lesbian may not be able to return emotional investment. Barb Sussex adds that street lesbians do care in cautious ways, but they need to develop skills in interpersonal relationships and understanding their own emotions. They need to experience non-abusive, non-exploitive, caring relationships. Developing a relationship with a street les-

bian, transitioning into a new life, can be a rewarding challenge. Taking a group of lesbians from Windfire to the beach for the day can provide you with a lot of laughs and expose you to the latest slang. About older lesbians, 16-year-old Sherri noted, "Sometimes I feel we put barriers between us; like, we have attitudes which keep us apart." She added that just because she's young doesn't mean she's dumb. She doesn't like being called "baby dyke" or "jailbait." Sometimes she gets intimidated by thinking that older lesbians are totally together, and that they don't have the same insecurities and fears that she does. She'd like to bridge some of these gaps and get to know some older lesbians.

Community is the way we pass on history and knowledge; it's also how we incorporate fresh perspectives, new visions of the future. Barriers between the generations impoverish. Dialogue, the simple antidote, enriches and enlivens us all.

If you are interested in getting to know younger lesbians and including them in the Community, here are some ways we can all get involved:

(1) Participate in the book drive for a lesbian library at the Outside-In drop-in center. Please see the sign and donation can at A Woman's Place Bookstore (1431 N.E. Broadway), or drop books off at Outside-In (1236 S.W. Salmon). For more information, call the Lesbian Community Project, 223-9079.

(2) Volunteer to facilitate a Windfire meeting. Call Ann Shepherd at 244-3225. Or, facilitate the new all-lesbian group. Call the LCP at 233-9079.

(3) Become an Advocate. Call Barb Sussex at 223-4121.

(4) Provide temporary safe housing. Call Barb, 223-4121.

(5) Come to the Lesbian Community Conference, November 8 and 9. Attend the Lesbian Youth workshop.

(6) When organizing community events, do outreach to young lesbians, donate a block of tickets to youth groups or charge a nominal admission fee, make sure events are accessible by public transportation, and do not serve alcohol.

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