



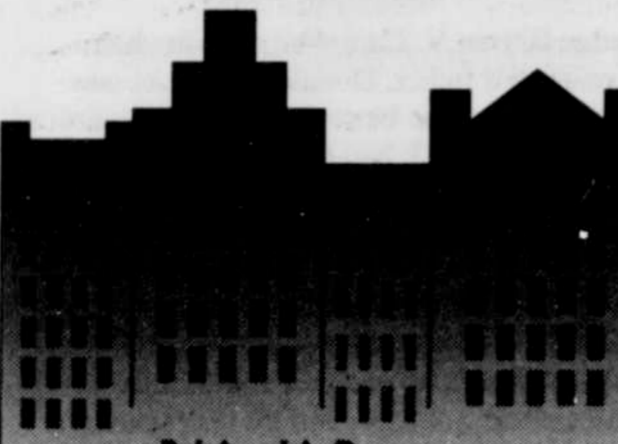
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just out^h

The problem with youth programs

Just at the age when gays and lesbians need support most, it is unavailable to them because of a lack of communication

BY WENDY L. WERNISING

I was thirteen years old when I realized that I was a lesbian. Coming to that realization ended a very tough period in my life. For months I had been walking around in a daze wondering, "What is wrong with me?"

When I finally understood that I was gay, I was both relieved and terrified: relieved because at least I knew why my whole life had been turned upside down; terrified because I believed that I was "wrong, bad, sick, and unacceptable."

This is what almost every American youngster is brought up thinking. People are not born with prejudices, which means that they must learn them somewhere. Whether it be at home, at school or in church, children are taught that homosexuality is wrong and many people go through life with that misconception.

So, in the midst of all this I was a 13-year-old lesbian trying to feel good about myself. It was impossible and I went through a lot of pain trying to hide who I was from my friends, parents and teachers.

I am now 16 years old, open about my lesbianism and politically active. But it has been an incredible struggle to get where I am. I think a lot of pain could be diminished if information about the gay community and



E. Ann Hinds

programs aimed at young people and their parents were more readily available.

In March of this year I attended my first Windfire meeting. I learned about this group when, in desperation, I called a Portland hotline number. They referred me to Phoenix Rising, which provides a facilitator for the meetings.

I was extremely happy to finally meet and talk to other young people who really understood the feelings and thoughts I had gone through. It was refreshing not to have to explain and justify everything I said. It was an open, accepting atmosphere and I finally had the much-needed feeling of being part of a community.

That was the beginning of a whole other side of my life. One that I had missed and needed more than I had realized. It's still not easy being a teenage lesbian, but having an understanding peer group where I can talk openly helps me deal with the prejudice I face every day.

Yes, the program is wonderful. The problem is that young people don't know that it exists. It took me three years of beating my head against the wall — a wall that separates every young person from the information that could save them so much frustration — to even find out about Windfire.

Just at the age when gays and lesbians need support most, it is unavailable to them due to a lack of communication. Sure, it's advertised in Just Out and promoted by hotline numbers but if you are young, scared and not even out to your parents, this information is almost impossible to obtain.

There is such a huge necessity for more advertisement and more youth groups. We are the future of this revolution and we can only make a difference if we are united. These programs will give us a chance to help each other and the whole community.

Just Youth is written by members of Windfire, a social and support group for people under 21 who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or unsure. See Out About Town for specifics.

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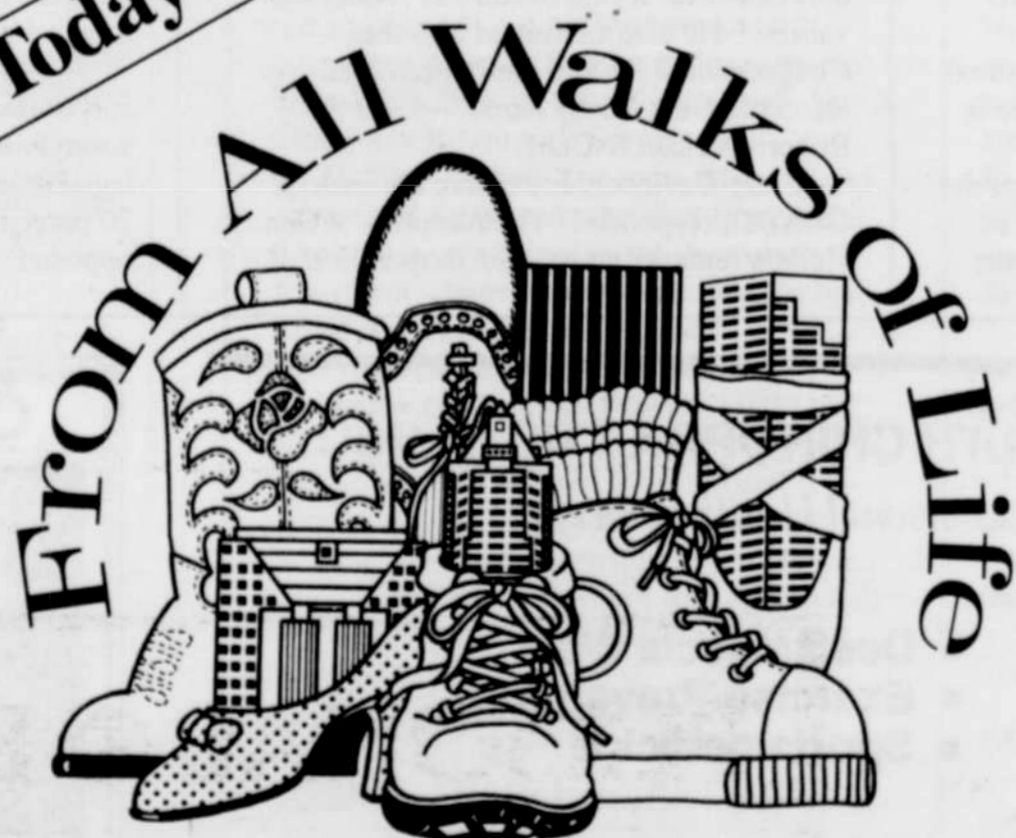
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