

I am gay

Young gays and lesbians are having relationships, they are sharing sex, and they just want to be taken seriously

by Tracy Dale

Mark didn't know that unprotected sex could be a lethal proposition. He was 16. He was experimenting. He didn't talk to anyone about being gay, and no one broached the subject with him.

Now 20, Mark (not his real name) just tested positive for HIV; his boyfriend of two years is afraid he's also contracted the virus.

"If more people would acknowledge gay youth as people, maybe this wouldn't have happened," Mark said. "At the time, I didn't know enough about AIDS, when I was sleeping around at the age of 16. No one seemed to care, no one told me differently. I didn't have anyone to talk about sex with.

"It wasn't accepted that I had a gay friend, so I knew my parents wouldn't help me any. I didn't know about gay books and newspapers. I didn't know that I could die from sleeping around."

Mark is not alone. Roni, Paula, Alex, Jen, Kay, Prudence and Melissa are all gay or lesbian youth. They are all dating. They are all out to one or both parents. And they know what it is like to be ignored or dismissed—to have their relationships overlooked, their sex lives declared taboo, their lives discounted. What they want is to be taken seriously.

Some of these young people were first aware of their sexual preference in kindergarten. Roni, 18, recalls that when she was five, she and her brother Joe would play house together with two neighbor girls.

"I always had a wife," she remembers. "Whenever they'd make me have a husband I'd throw a fit. So my brother and I would run around with our shirts off, with our stereotypical housewives."

When Paula, 20, was born, her parents assumed she would be heterosexual. So when Paula started realizing she wasn't like the other kids, she didn't tell anyone else about her feelings. She was sure she wouldn't be accepted. When Paula did finally come out to her family she found that her suspicion was right all along.

Many youth, like Paula, were afraid when they were young that they would be punished for feeling sexual toward someone of their gender.

you'll never get there. At least this way you know that it can be done, and that you've done it before."

Youth who are gay or lesbian often turn to others like themselves for comfort, acceptance, even guidance. Their peers become a part of their lives. When no one else will understand, they know their close friends will.

Melissa, 19, is one of the lucky ones. "I had a lot of lesbian friends who I could look up to



PHOTO BY CATHERINE STAUFFER

Lee, 21, Randy, 20

Lee and Randy dance in a show on Saturday nights at the City Nightclub. The City is a gay positive underage club. "People come to express themselves at a place they know they won't be judged," says EST, the club's disc jockey.

Roni thought she was going to "burn in hell" for being with a young girl once when she was seven years old.

Kay learned about lesbians from her mom, when she was seven, by watching her in bed one day with her girlfriend. She then decided to try the same thing with a neighbor girl. She was caught, but not punished. Today she considers herself a lesbian and says she knew as early as first grade. Another teen, Danielle, remembers looking at girls "in the way I shouldn't have been" when she was in junior high.

In many elementary school playgrounds, little boys and girls chase each other; kids know what they want at a very young age. Many gay or lesbian youth interviewed said they were told their feelings were "just a phase" or that they would "grow out of it." Those messages prevented them from learning what they might need for future relationships.

As gay and lesbian youth move through adolescence, they may discover messages that "it's okay to be gay." Support comes from peers, the community and their own increasing self-knowledge. But they still struggle for acceptance. It's hard to swallow when society tells you that feelings you've known about for years—or just became aware of—are wrong.

Alex, 21, described this as "a constant game of 'around the world.' You make enough progress, and you get halfway around the court line and then you miss a shot and are forced back to the beginning.

"Then again, if you don't take that chance,

and ask questions about sex, and things like that," she said. But for others, like Roni, it isn't all that easy.

"I only know three lesbians around my age, and I have a few older friends who are gay. I'm too far away, though, so I usually only talk to them on the phone, and not all that often."

Intimate relationships, a backbone of life for everyone, can be especially crucial for gay and lesbian youth. Dating can provide the chance to share intimate feelings with someone and be loved for who they are, outside of society's standards.

But relationships and sex are often taboo topics among adults who work with youth. Sex education in schools focuses on how babies are born and how to avoid pregnancy. Gay sex isn't a part of the state's education plan; gay and lesbian kids never have a chance to learn that their feelings for the same gender are natural and healthy.

Gay teens are sexually active. Just ask them. They worry about contracting the HIV virus. They worry about whether their partners are being honest with them about past sexual histories. They wonder if they'll have anyone to go to for answers to their questions.

Many buy books on sexual topics; others, like Jen, have a "second mom" they can talk to about sexual questions. The majority, though, learn by experimenting. "It seems gay kids have sex a lot earlier than hetero kids do," Dandi said.

When gay youth do date, they may find their social lives invisible, or minimized by adults,



PHOTO BY CATHERINE STAUFFER

Andrew, 20, Tommy, 20

Andrew and Tommy are "Queer Activists." They are both members of Queer Nation, the Pink Panthers, No on Hate and the Anti-Homophobic Violence project. "Our whole lives revolve around meetings and actions," says Tommy. "It's exhausting work, but we have to do it because we are sick and tired and we want to stop homophobia."

both gay and straight. Meeting potential partners can be difficult.

"There aren't a lot of places for gay youth to go these days, except one club...and Windfire," said Prudence. "Most of them aren't old enough to get into the bars. There aren't enough activities out there."

The larger gay and lesbian community "doesn't take gay youth relationships seriously enough," said Paula. "They are treated far too lightly and with very little respect."

For Mark, that silence had serious consequences.



PHOTO BY CATHERINE STAUFFER

From top left: Tony, Robert, Aaron, Christina, Colin, Sue, Shannon, Monica, and Dandi.

"It seems like everyone thinks we don't know what we're doing or that we can figure it all out on our own. It just isn't that easy, and I had to learn the hard way.

"Now I've got a good relationship, and I haven't done that [slept around] for two years. I left my past behind to start a new beginning with a man I love very much, even though I'm young. So now I'm going to lose my life because of it. I'm not blaming anyone. I just hope...people will start talking about sex and relationships and the youth of tomorrow before it's too late for all of us."



PHOTO BY CATHERINE STAUFFER

Susan, 21

Susan Bucciarelli grew up in NE Portland and came out at Jefferson High School when she was 14. "Everyone in high school already knew—the way I looked at girls in the lunch lines and at basketball games really pissed off their boyfriends. The only people left to come out to was my family."