

*In order to protect the youth who have told their life stories for this article, their names have been changed.*

It's Thursday night, and a downstairs room of Outside In is abuzz with excitement as young people congregate for a weekly VOICES meeting. Some gather around a center table and eat pizza; others sort through a pile of painted T-shirts, looking for the ones they created. Dance music blares in the background.

Since March 1992, VOICES, which stands for "Voices of Individual and Community Empowerment from the Street," has brought queer street youth together for two hours a week to be with friends, eat pizza, listen to music, experiment with a video camera, design T-shirts or just hang out in a safe, supporting environment. VOICES was founded by Mark Stucker when he was attending the Graduate School of Social Work at Portland State University. While two other groups in Portland serve queer youth, VOICES is the only group that specifically serves youths who are homeless or living on the streets.

Facilitated by Stucker and Ann Hinds and co-sponsored by Outside In and Phoenix Rising, VOICES encompasses many projects for youth. Designing T-shirts, for example, is a weekly activity. The project gives them something to wear that shows off their personality.

Another ongoing component is Street Friends, which was added early last year. To encourage community activism, each week two youths are chosen to represent the VOICES group on the streets. They hand out business cards with the time and place of VOICES to anyone who might be interested in coming to the group. Youths are paid \$10 for each week they work. This outreach work helps to bring in some of the estimated 65 percent of queer street youth who haven't previously attended VOICES.

"Before we get started, who wants to do Street Friends this week?" Stucker asks the group. Toni St. James, who is 21 years old and has been living on the street since he was 15, automatically raises his hand, along with a few others. Through some negotiation, it's decided that St. James and a new participant to VOICES, Scott Jones, will be Street Friends this week.

St. James said he likes encouraging friends who are hesitant to come to the group. "I find myself as a role model when I take these cards and get people to come to the group." Jones and another youth, Rick Davies, learned of VOICES through St. James.

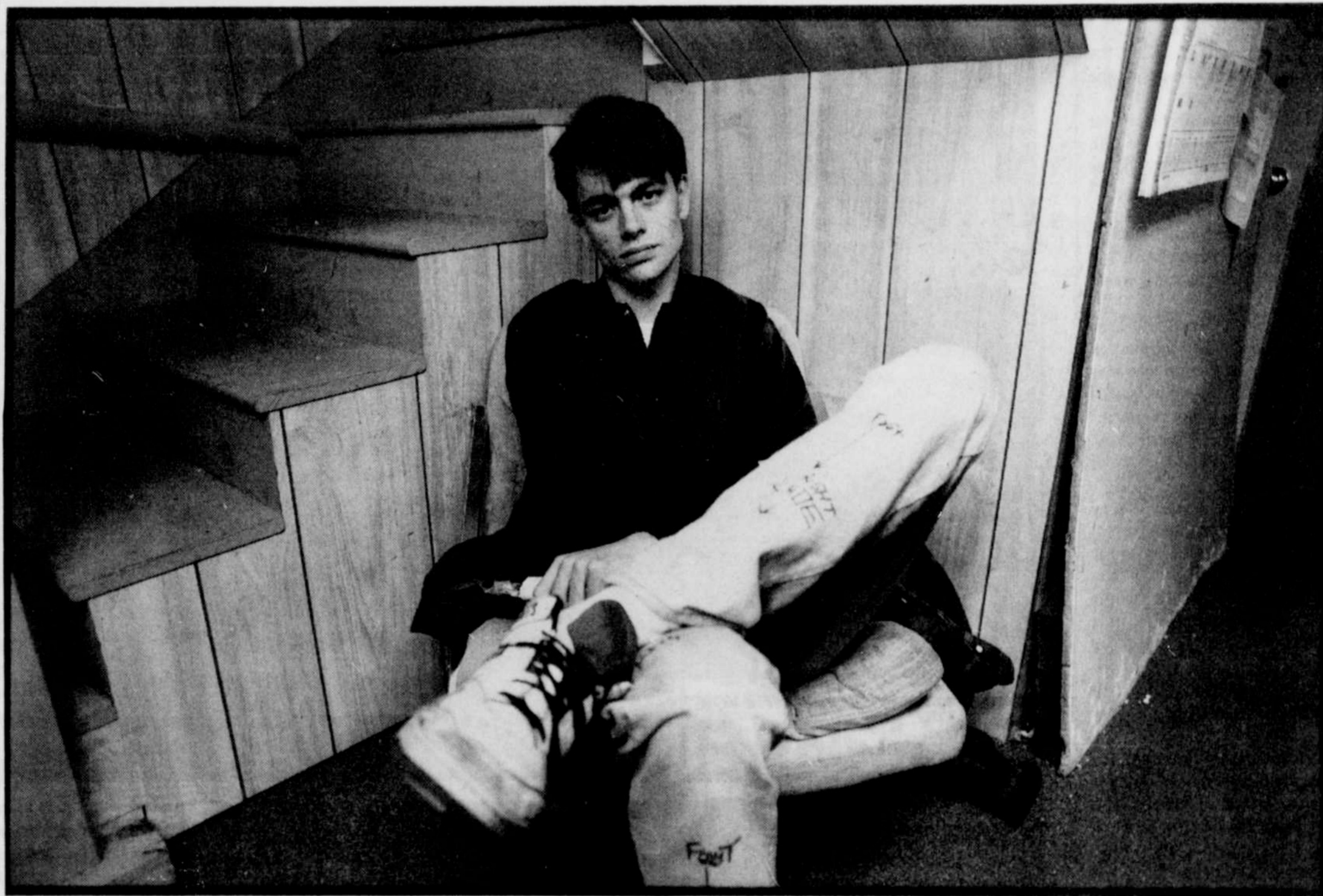
When Street Friends assignments are settled, the youths start on this week's activity. The kids have designed a billboard for VOICES to be displayed at Outside In. Tonight, they are drawing pictures that will be incorporated into the design.

"I feel that the kids who come are the voice of VOICES," St. James said. Youth who attend can explore parts of themselves that can be squelched elsewhere, he said.

## STREET OUT REACH

*VOICES honors the survival stories of queer youth who have found a home on the streets*

by Pamela Lyons



Toni St. James at Outside In

PHOTO BY LINDA KLIEWER

Part of being themselves means, for many youths, honoring the streets as their home. "The street itself represents a lot of what is thought to be gay life," Hinds said. There can also be a sense of rejection and isolation seen nowhere as clearly as on the streets, she said. Also, youth are often times attracted to the street because that's where they hear the "gay community" is, Stucker said. To be on the streets may mean to them that they have "made it." "The freedom of being on the streets can feel like a sense of high self-esteem, and also low self-esteem," Hinds said.

When St. James turned 21 last year, he wanted to take part in all the usual rituals—going to bars, having his first legal drink and hanging

out with friends.

But when the tall, thin, brown-haired man showed up at a bar on Stark Street, he was brutally reminded of his past. "They wouldn't let me in," he said. "They wouldn't let me in because they said they saw me prostituting across the street. They didn't want me in there prostituting."

St. James, who is European American, has been homeless since his mother kicked him out of the house when he was 15 years old. He was just struggling to come out at the time. After going from foster home to foster home, with nowhere else to turn, he went to the streets. He lives mostly in Portland and spends time in Seattle and San Francisco.

To make money, he would participate in pros-

titution. To get "dates," or "johns," he'd hang out across from the bars on a Stark Street corner. He might have 30 or more johns in any given week. While living on the streets, he was stabbed in a homophobic assault that caused one lung to collapse, and was arrested for prostitution by a policeman posing as a john.

Last June, St. James decided to give up prostitution. Sometimes, he's tempted to go back and make the quick money—but then he remembers what it was like. "Believe it or not, when I'm on a 'date,' I numb all my feelings," he said. "I don't let any feeling show at all. I mean, it hurts inside—but I'd need the money."

St. James' story of survival on the streets is not uncommon. He said he knows at least 30 queer youth who live on the streets or in shelters. While actual numbers are hard to determine, some professionals estimate that 16 queer youth are sleeping on Portland streets on any given night. That's about 30 percent of the total downtown street youth population.

When these youths need help—housing, food, health care or emotional support—there aren't that many places to which they can turn. They might experience homophobia in shelters, or they might get glares from passers-by while on the streets. When help is offered, it often can come with negative judgments or downright contempt for their lives.

"It doesn't matter who I get help from," St. James said. "In a way, I'm kinda depressed. I'm a

very depressed person. Mainly because I'm disappointed in my community."

When St. James says community, he is referring to the adult gay, lesbian and bisexual community. The adult sexual minority community does not have a strong tradition of caring for youth for a few reasons, said Stucker. Because there are few structures set up, people might not know where to go to help. Or people might want to, but are scared of being accused of "recruitment" or molestation. "When we talk about homeless gay youth, we're really talking about ourselves—or around ourselves," Stucker said. "We're talking about our failure to establish ... that sense of taking care of one's own.

We're talking around our failure to establish traditions of social service—except when our own lives, or the lives of those very similar, are at stake."

VOICES may be the beginning of creating a tradition in Portland for assisting queer street youth. A diverse group of street youth have attended VOICES since its inception. Last year, about one-third of the participants were women, 60 percent of whom identified as bisexual. Ten percent of the women identified as lesbian, five percent as dyke and the rest as gay, straight or unsure. Of the men, 41 percent said they were gay, 26 percent were bisexual, 15 percent straight and the rest unsure or didn't answer the question. (Queer participants of

*Continued on next page*