

local news

After reading a notice in her community newsletter, Tara Latham decided to volunteer for the Great Expectations Mentoring Program at Cleveland High School, a public high school in Southeast Portland. The 34-year-old single mother, whose young daughter will one day attend Cleveland, thought it would be a terrific way to make a contribution to her neighborhood. It didn't work out that way, however. Latham says when she approached coordinators of the program, which pairs responsible adults in the community with high school students who have requested support, she was turned away because they perceived she was a lesbian.

"When I first contacted the program they seemed thrilled that I was interested," explains Latham, who is heterosexual and shares housing with another woman. "I filled out all the necessary paperwork and went in for an interview. Everything was going great and then they asked me what type of youngster I would like to be matched up with. I said I'd like to work with a gay or lesbian student."

According to Latham, the interview concluded soon after that and the coordinators told her they would get back to her.

"I didn't hear anything for a couple of weeks. Finally they got back to me and told me they didn't know of any gay kids. I told them that I was still interested in being a mentor and they told me they didn't need me," she says. "I felt like I was getting the brushoff."

Latham says one of the coordinators, Mary Ann Myers, assumed Latham was a lesbian because she had requested to work with a gay or lesbian youth. Latham also suspects her living arrangements and single-mother status led Great Expectations to believe Latham was a lesbian.

"It shouldn't matter if I am or not, but it did to them. It gradually came out during our phone conversation that this was a major concern. [Myers] said they needed to be 'careful of what takes place on school property,' and she said just imagine if a 14-year-old girl had a gay mentor and the girl went home and told her parents that she thought she [the youngster] may be a lesbian," says Latham. "When I finally said, 'Listen, I happen to be straight—not that it should matter—could I now be a mentor?' Myers said, 'Yes, I think you could be, now.'"

Latham says Myers told her to contact Phoenix Rising Foundation if she wanted to work with a lesbian or gay youth. Latham says she wanted to volunteer to help kids in her neighborhood.

Myers did not return our phone calls, but we did speak with her assistant, Juli Schneider, an AmeriCorps Vista volunteer who works with Great Expectations.

"This person [Latham] was looking for something our program doesn't provide," says Schneider. When asked what the program does provide, she responded: "This is a program for at-risk youth. We attempt to provide at-risk students with a capable and supportive adult figure that they may not always have had at home."

Numerous studies indicate sexual minority youth face myriad challenges associated with their sexual orientation and society's homophobia. Many are kicked out of their homes by parents who cannot deal with their children being gay or lesbian. Because these youngsters often go without any societal support, they are at-risk for drug and alcohol abuse, as well as suicide.

"It's the kids that I really worry about. I have lots of lesbian friends and have long been aware that gay youth are at greater risk for suicide and other problems. I wanted to be there to help, but Great Expectations doesn't seem to think that gay kids exist at Cleveland High School," says Latham.

In a letter sent to Cleveland High School officials, the Portland School Board, and several media outlets, Latham asked: "How on earth can a

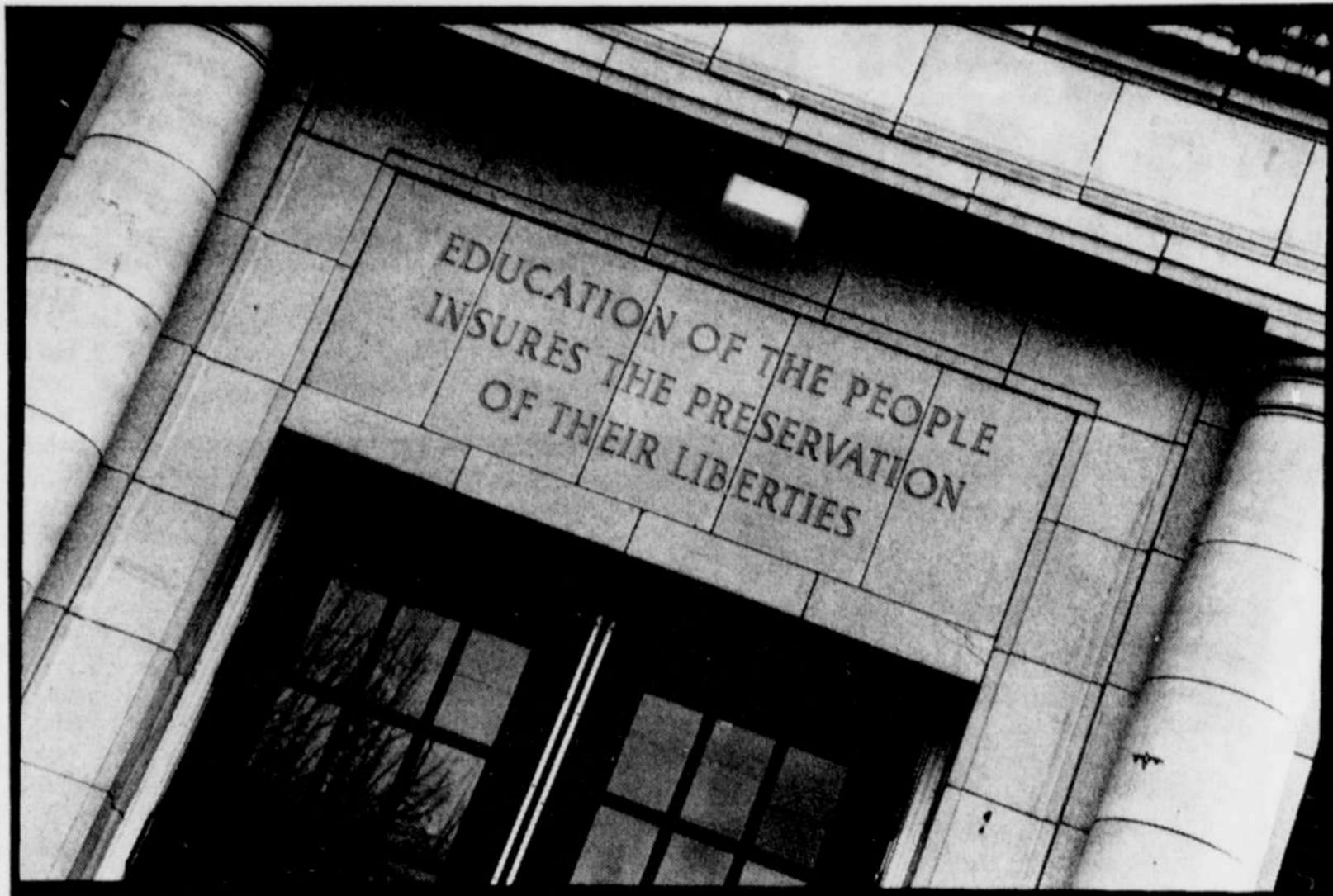


PHOTO BY LINDA KLEWER

No queer youth here?

Great expectations or no expectations—at Cleveland High School, it may depend on whether or not you're a queer youth

by Inga Sorensen

counseling department help kids with this prejudicial attitude and stereotyping? It comes as no surprise to me that no kids or faculty members are out of the closet at that school: It is not a safe environment in which to come out."

Says David Aiken, Cleveland High School's curriculum vice principal: "She [Latham] can draw her own conclusions. What I'll say is that if a student needs support, we'll try and meet their specific needs."

"I know it looks like we thought sexual orientation was an issue, but that's not the case at all," says Schneider, who joined Myers in interviewing Latham. "She [Latham] wanted a gay youth and we simply didn't have a match. It's that simple."

The program, which is funded by a grant from Oregon Together, a community coalition to assist drug and alcohol prevention, and the Cleveland Caring Community, requires mentors to spend one hour per week on campus with their students.

According to Schneider, during its two-year existence at Cleveland High School, Great Expectations, which is currently working with 25 student/mentor pairs, has never been approached by a gay or lesbian student.

As for Myers' alleged remarks, Schneider says:

"I can't respond to that. I can't second-guess what Mary Ann said."

The alleged incident disturbs not only Latham. Bonnie Tinker is an openly lesbian mother whose daughter graduated from Cleveland in the late 1980s.

"There had been a situation where my daughter was in need of—and certainly entitled to—some

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—Tara Latham



PHOTO BY LINDA KLEWER

[support] services because her problems stem from her home life [because] her mother's a lesbian."

Tinker continues, "My daughter eventually received those services, but I don't think that would have happened if I hadn't worked on developing a relationship with other educators and administrators at the school."

Tinker stresses she is not making a critical statement about the entire Cleveland teaching and administrative staff. In fact, she says she spent "a

lot of time" researching schools before settling on Cleveland. "Cleveland has a very diverse student body, which was important to us," she says. "And I felt that if any staff could handle issues surrounding diversity, it would be Cleveland. However, I think that schools in general are very frightened about issues involving sexual orientation—even to the point of denying equal access to their services."

Portland City Attorney Madelyn Wessel, who drafted the city's ordinance barring discrimination based on sexual orientation in housing, employment and public accommodations, says Latham's legal rights may have been violated.

"The Portland ordinance could conceivably cover a case like this, particularly as it relates to public accommodations," says Wessel. Under the ordinance, public accommodations is defined as "any place or service offering to the public accommodations, advantages, facilities or privileges whether in the nature of goods, services, lodgings, amusements or otherwise." Great Expectations Mentoring Program could be viewed as a service, she says.

"One could look at it as though here was a person attempting to partake in a service but was denied that opportunity because of her perceived sexual orientation," explains Wessel. "There's a funny little corner though. For instance, if a student was not allowed to be part of the program because of [his or her] sexual orientation, it would assuredly be a violation. It's a little trickier to determine whether the person who is seeking to provide the service has had [his or her] rights violated. I'm not sure, but there may potentially be a claim."

Tinker and Wessel say if Latham's version of the incident is correct, they hope the situation could be resolved internally.

"This was probably the type of situation where someone was taken off guard by the request and made a statement that was not reflective of the program as a whole," says Wessel. "I think we can all understand why many people, particularly in the schools, may be feeling paranoid. Just think about that uproar last year involving a teacher who was attempting to teach a sex-education class. Some people began saying he was trying to push homosexuality on children and it turned into a big deal."

Tinker adds: "Schools share the same homophobia that society does. As more gays and lesbians come out, counselors and educators are having to deal with that and lots of times they're uncomfortable and don't know how to."

Tinker and others are working to foster greater understanding around gay and lesbian issues within the schools. For instance, Tinker was instrumental in getting the Oregon Parents and Teachers Association to adopt a resolution last year opposing prejudice directed against parents, students and teachers on the grounds of sexual orientation. The group, which has 28,000 members statewide, reasoned that prejudice against gay men and lesbians would adversely affect students. The resolution also expressed opposition to the Oregon Citizens Alliance's discriminatory measures.

"We're trying to make the system better, but it takes time," says Tinker.

Latham hopes "things get better" by the time her daughter, currently a preschooler, reaches high school. Latham writes: "Much to my dismay, my daughter will one day attend school at Cleveland. I can only hope that those antiquated, fearful, prejudicial attitudes will have changed by then."

"I volunteered to be a mentor for a teen in my community who now loses out on my support. I did not volunteer to be a victim of assumption and discrimination. This has been a very interesting introduction to the Portland Public School System."