

## YOUTH

# School is hell

*But for sexual minority youth at least, a new advocate may make the agony a little easier to deal with*

▼  
by Inga Sorensen

September is a month that many young people look forward to. It marks a time when they return to school and rejoin the friends they left behind a few months earlier. But for sexual minority youth, heading back to school is often synonymous with ostracism and harassment.

"Every kid I have worked with has been harassed at school. Regardless of the gains we've made in terms of more people being out in this society, high school is still a hellish place for sexual minority youth," says 30-year-old Kathy Belge, a counselor with Roots and Branches, a Portland-based nonprofit program that provides counseling services to lesbian, gay and bisexual young people. "These kids often feel like they have no one to talk to and no support whatsoever. We want them to know that's not the case."

Thanks to funding from Multnomah County, Roots and Branches is providing a new service to youth: a case manager/support person who will act as an advocate for sexual minority young people. According to the agency, this is the first time that gay, lesbian and bisexual youth in Multnomah County have had an advocate specifically designated to assist them in meeting their goals. The service is free to sexual minority youth between the ages of 13 and 17 who live in the county.

"These are young people who have been identified as being at-risk. My main goal is to keep them in school, employed and out of the juvenile justice system," says Belge, who may assist as many as 40 sexual minority youth and their families during the next year. "It's easy for a kid who has no support to wind up in some sort of trouble."

According to Mary Li, a senior program specialist with the Multnomah County Community and Family Services Division, \$40,000 has been made available to fund the post. (An additional \$50,000 is being directed toward other programs assisting this particular population in Multnomah County.)

Li says the county has received \$1.5 million in state funds for 1995-96 for what is known as Level 7 programs. "The [state] Children's Services Division has designated seven at-risk levels, Level 7 is the lowest-risk of these high-risk designations," says Li.

"In other words," she says, "these are young people who are acting out, but haven't yet made their way into the system. For example, they haven't done anything bad enough to wind up in the custody of CSD, but potentially could."

Li says the funding is being used to provide support to several populations that have been deemed at-risk, including ethnic minorities and gay, lesbian and bisexual young people.

According to a comprehensive 1991 Oregon study, there are at least 50,000 sexual minority youth statewide, many of whom face hardship and discrimination. Studies have repeatedly shown that

gay, lesbian and bisexual youth are at risk for being turned out onto the streets by unaccepting family members, dropping out of school, as well as drug and alcohol abuse and suicide.

"These kids are up against a lot. They often go without support from family or schools. They feel isolated by peers who won't accept them. It's tough out there," says Belge.

Another disturbing conclusion in the Oregon report, which was based on numerous interviews with young people, is that support systems for sexual minority youth are woefully lacking. Many health and child welfare specialists say this prob-



Kathy Belge

lem often stems from a lack of awareness about the needs of sexual minority youth.

"Multnomah County has a real commitment to serving these kids," says Li. "We're delighted the funding has become available to us to serve this population which has historically gone underserved."

Belge says she is currently working with eight young people "dealing with all sorts of issues."

"I may help them stay employed or stay in school. If they need to get into a shelter, I'll help them with that. Some may eventually end up in trouble for very minor things like violating the curfew or riding Tri-Met without paying the fare. If they have to go to court, I'll be there. If they simply need an adult to talk to, I'll be there for that as well," she says.

"In September I plan to do more outreach into the schools. I think it's critical that teachers and counselors know that they have a place to refer sexual minority youth who need assistance," says Belge, who came out at 19 and says she can relate to some of the hardships faced by these kids. "I didn't have to go through all the tough times in high school because I came out when I was older, but my parents didn't have the easiest time with it, and I'm also easily identifiable on the street as a lesbian. In many ways I can relate to these kids."

For more information about the new service, contact Roots and Branches at 238-0780.

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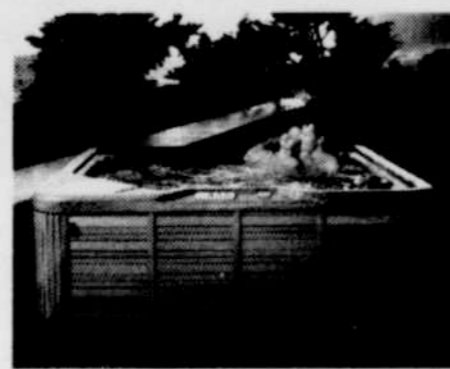


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