

YOUTH

PHOTO BY LINDA KUEJER



Youth at the 1993 conference held at Beaverton's Greenwood Inn

If Claudia L. Webster is afraid of controversy, she doesn't show it.

"I'll be meeting with the Portland Police Bureau next week," said Webster in a warm yet matter-of-fact tone. "It's always better to be prepared." That was a few weeks ago, when the Oregon Health Division's HIV education manager was putting the final organizational touches on the Third Regional Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Youth Conference set for Oct. 13 and 14 at the Portland Conference Center.

The regional conference is one of only a few in the nation that explicitly aims to improve services for lesbian, gay and bisexual youth.

According to conference materials, the gathering, which attracts youth and a multitude of service providers including teachers, is designed to "promote an open, honest and accurate discussion of and with sexual minority youth, their issues and their service needs."

It is a goal, admits Webster—a certified sexuality instructor—that not everyone finds desirable.

"There's always going to be controversy when you're talking about sexuality issues and young people. That's just the way it is," she says.

During the last conference, which was held two years ago at the Greenwood Inn in Beaverton, protesters arrived brandishing signs saying "Reading, Writing, Homosexuality?" "Stop Government Promotion of Homosexuality," and "Don't Honor Perversity." One girl in blue jeans and sneakers clutched a sign demanding: "Teach me to read and write. Leave the rest to my parents."

"The Beaverton police and hotel security were just great," Webster recounts. "Everything went beautifully, and I'm certainly hoping for the same this year."

And just 10 days ago, Concerned Women for America, an ultraconservative organization that claims 600,000 members, launched a very public attack on the National Education Association's adoption of a resolution supporting national Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual History Month.

According to wire reports, CWA founder Beverly LaHaye says the NEA is "using [its] power to promote an unhealthy lifestyle that represents only 1 percent of Americans. They are not a legitimate minority group. Our schools have no business 'celebrating' diversity. We are fighting to protect the innocence and purity of our children and grandchildren."

Meanwhile, in Washington, D.C., a U.S. House committee was slated to begin hearings Oct. 13 to investigate a claim by Traditional Values Coalition founder Lou Sheldon about the supposed "infiltration of the homosexual agenda within public schools." The congressional hearings are the result of a promise that Sheldon extracted from House Speaker Newt Gingrich, and are viewed by the TVC as a "golden opportunity." Sheldon wants Congress to deny federal funds to any school district that tolerates sexual-identity diversity. (As we went to press, the hearings have been postponed.)

"Some people will say to me, 'I'm offended by what you're doing.' But I've seen too many people die because they didn't have proper information or support when they needed it," says Webster. "I tell people who are offended by our education efforts that I am personally offended by seeing people die needlessly. That's offensive."

She adds: "This is a critical health issue. Young people are having unprotected sex; the teen-suicide rate for sexual minority youth is way out of proportion with other teens. These are issues that must be addressed."

According to a comprehensive 1991 Oregon study, there are at least 50,000 sexual minority youth statewide, many of whom face hardship and discrimination. The report, which included several interviews with young people, found that support systems for sexual minority youth were woefully deficient, primarily due to a lack of relevant education among service providers.

The study concluded that many service providers brought their prejudices with them to work, or simply overlooked the needs of sexual minority

youth because their professional training never addressed the subject. It also found that many gay, lesbian and bisexual youth experienced severe ostracism and harassment within a school setting.

"Teachers and school counselors have historically been terrified to touch this issue," says Webster. "The push by ultraconservatives across the country to elect school board members who are anti-HIV education, anti-sexuality education, and anti-diversity education, doesn't help. But we need to be working in the schools to help teachers identify when harassment [of sexual minority youth] is occurring and what to do about it."

Admittedly, great gains have occurred in some places during the past few years. More schools are sponsoring support groups for sexual minority youth; gay and lesbian parents are working with educators and parent groups to create dialogue and understanding about sexual orientation issues; more local governments are approving legal protections based on sexual orientation that may prompt gay and lesbian educators (and their supportive colleagues) to feel more secure about publicly addressing sexual minority youth issues.

Another symbol of acceptance includes the Portland School Board's recent vote to bar recruiters from school grounds because of the military's ban on openly lesbian and gay servicemembers. (The Oregonian ran a Sept. 26 editorial chastising the board's action and urged it to allow recruiters back into the schools.)

"It's getting better, particularly in metropolitan areas, but if you're in a rural area it can be tough," says Webster, adding that she received a call toward the end of the last school year from an educator in Southern Oregon who was scrambling to find help for a suicidal student struggling with sexual identity issues.

That incident, says Webster, reflects the critical needs of both the youth and the educator, and she hopes the conference will give young people and service providers the support and information they need.

This year's conference features educator Kevin Jennings, executive director of the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Teachers Network, a national organization which has sponsored conferences for teachers throughout the country, as well

as a West Coast retreat for lesbian and gay educators and a summer institute for students and teachers.

Jennings, who teaches history part time at Concord Academy, is the author of *Becoming Visible: A Reader in Gay and Lesbian History for High School and College Students and One Teacher in 10: Gay and Lesbian Educators Tell Their Stories*. He also spearheaded an effort to get October recognized as Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual History Month. (Oregon Gov. John Kitzhaber has issued a proclamation inaugurating the event in Oregon.)

Joyce Hunter, director of the community liaison program of the HIV Center for Clinical and Behavioral Studies/New York State Psychiatric Institute, is also a featured presenter.

Hunter is the board president of the National Lesbian and Gay Health Association and co-founder of Harvey Milk High School in New York City. Established in 1985, it is the nation's first high school founded solely to serve lesbian, gay and bisexual students. Hunter has also been an activist, researcher and clinician for more than 25 years, specializing in issues relating to youth, women, HIV/AIDS and the sexual minorities community.

Also on hand will be Evan Cutler, author of *Runaway Me: A Survivor's Story*, which tells Cutler's tale of running away from home when he was 15. Cutler, who is now 27, hopes to prevent other teenagers from encountering the problems that he did during his time on the streets.

Numerous workshops, whose titles include Sexual Minority Youth Come In All Colors, Increasing Self-Esteem of Lesbian and Gay Youth, Homophobia 101, and HIV as a Method of Suicide: Policy Considerations, will be conducted throughout the two-day event.

Ten agencies and organizations are sponsoring the conference. They are: the Department of Human Resources, Oregon Health Division; the State Office for Services to Children and Families; Portland Public Schools/Sexual Diversity Committee; the Phoenix Rising Foundation; Cascade AIDS Project; Harry's Mother; Metropolitan Community Church; Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays; the Lesbian Community Project; and the Multnomah County Health Department.

"There are more role models now for gay and lesbian young people than there were 10 years ago,

but these young people and their families still need support," says Anne Bliss, president of Portland PFLAG, which has spent the past few months distributing packets containing information about sexual minority issues to high schools across Oregon. "This is a golden opportunity for networking."

Allanya Guenther of Phoenix Rising, which provides counseling services to sexual minority youth, says, "There are so few youth conferences that focus on gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered youth. It is really wonderful that we have this, and we should make the most of it."

The Rev. Roy Cole, pastor of Portland's Metropolitan Community Church, which serves sexual minority worshippers, adds: "Young people in particular have been beaten up by the Bible, and that can fuel a tremendous lack of self-esteem. One of the reasons it was important to me that MCC co-sponsor this conference was to show young people and adults that not all of Christianity is opposed to homosexuality, quite the contrary."

The conference has already been marked by a subtle controversy, involving a letter sent to one of its sponsors. The letter is signed by Todd Siex, who identifies himself as a parole/probation officer for the Oregon Youth Authority's Baker County office. The Oregon Department of Human Resources oversees the OYA.

In that missive, which is dated Aug. 21 and is on official state letterhead, Siex takes issue with the conference: "As a youth worker with over 15 years of experience in the field, I am distressed to find that a cause such as yours can be given enough credibility to be advertised in our local office.... It is a clear indication of how complacent our government has become on this issue," he writes.

"I must take issue with your conference goal from the outset. The goal of your conference is not to promote open, honest discussion, but to establish as natural behavior which is unnatural. An honest discussion would include differing viewpoints, rather than an accumulation of like-minded people with an identical agenda—to legitimize homosexual behavior," he writes. "Homosexuality is one of the few societal disorders which has been enabled rather than challenged to provide a remedy."

Siex concludes, "There is certainly no way that I would encourage a youth struggling with his or her identity to [attend] such a biased conference as you are sponsoring. Your approach merely enables the disorder, rather than providing youth with hope for permanent change and normalcy."

"As an agency we do not support the views expressed by this individual," says Gary Lawhead, assistant administrator for OYA's community programs. "We are totally supportive of the Department of Human Resources and of this conference. Certainly this is one of the most controversial topics today, and in our employee ranks there are people with many viewpoints, but it's one thing for someone to hold a personal opinion and it's another to express it on agency letterhead."

State officials say disciplinary action may be administered in this case pending the outcome of an investigation; they would not, however, speculate as to what specific action—if any—would occur. Siex did not respond to our phone calls.

Guenther says, "I think this situation does raise questions about whether sexual minority youth will receive proper services, but I'm confident the department will do the right thing. I also think this proves why conferences like these are so important."

Anyone interested in attending the Third Regional Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Youth Conference can receive a registration packet by calling Phoenix Rising at 223-8299. The registration fee is \$125. Registration will take place at the conference, though preregistration is encouraged. A limited number of scholarships are available for youth. For more information, call Phoenix Rising's youth services coordinator at 223-8299. The Portland Conference Center is located at 300 NE Multnomah, at Martin Luther King Boulevard, in Portland.