



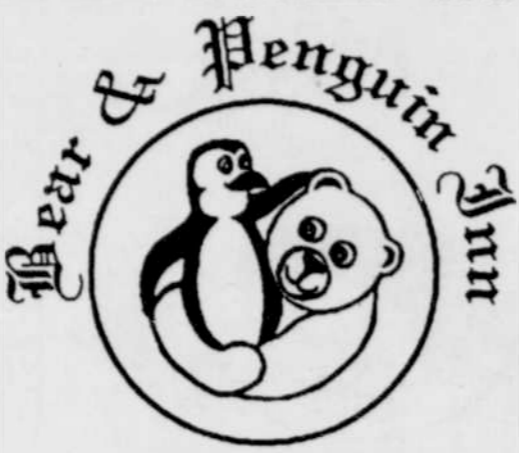
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# local news

## Lesson plan

Plans are in the works for a project that will inform rural educators on the special needs of queer youth

by Inga Sorensen

A pending project seeks to educate professionals who work with sexual minority youth, particularly those living in rural areas of Oregon and neighboring states.

"This will be different from most projects that deal with gay youth in that we will not work directly with young people," explains Bruce Amsbary of the Bend-based Beyond The Closet, the sexual minority educational and advocacy organization that is launching the rural queer youth outreach project.

"We want to get resources to those professionals—everybody from teachers to counselors to clergy—that come into contact with queer youth on a regular basis, but may not necessarily have the information they need that enables them to be as supportive as they should be," he says.

The mission of Beyond The Closet is to, in part, promote the understanding and acceptance of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people. Founded in 1994, Beyond The Closet also seeks to "form alliances that work for social, environmental and economic justice."

In January, the group's board decided to focus on sexual minority youth, whose needs often go unmet.

"Gay organizations typically shy away from youth because they don't want to be viewed as recruiters," says Amsbary.

On the flip side, the broader community often ignores this population or treats it with hostility.

"I've heard of situations where teachers make blatant homophobic remarks in class," he says. "That can be devastating to a young person."

Amsbary says although resources and information are increasingly available to and about sexual minority youth, this population's general invisibility—and the typically unfriendly climate in which they experience their daily lives—makes it difficult to successfully connect queer youth to appropriate services.

He believes educating adults about the available resources—as well as accurate information regarding sexual minority youth—is critical if young people are going to have their needs met.

"There may be supportive adults and professionals out there, but they may not have information that makes it easier for them to assist youth," says Amsbary. "A project like this could hopefully fill those voids."

Other attempts have been made to get information to teachers, counselors and school administrators. For instance, the Portland chapter of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays recently compiled comprehensive educational packets that included a potpourri of information about sexual minority youth, and sent the

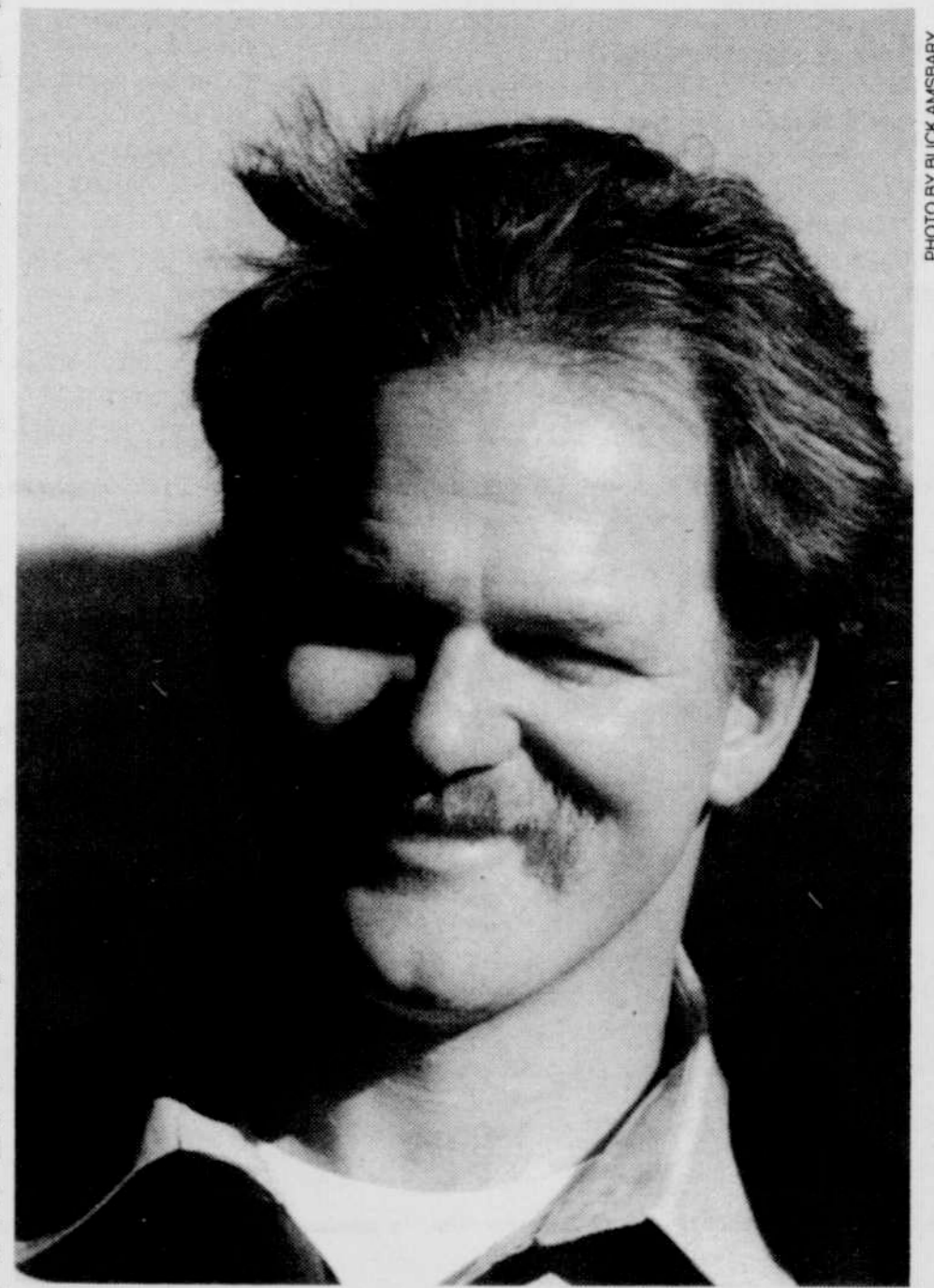
packets to schools throughout the state.

According to Amsbary, the rural queer youth project will likely work with groups such as PFLAG, the many human dignity groups associated with the Rural Organizing Project, and others who are interested in creating safe climates for sexual minority youth.

He hopes the project will be up and running by the beginning of the next school year.

Scott Thiemann, the project's outreach coordinator, says that will depend on how much grant money can be secured. If enough funding is obtained, Thiemann will travel throughout rural Oregon assisting residents who express a desire to create safe and equitable environments for queer youth.

Such work is not new to Thiemann, who is the



Bruce Amsbary

former director of the "Outreach to Rural Youth Project." In that position he spent three years journeying through eastern Washington meeting with hundreds of professionals and youth.

"There's still a lot of misinformation out there. Look at the OCA's ballot initiative that said 'Child Protection Act,'" comments Thiemann. "Nobody seems to be responding to that.... We've got to get the facts to people."

Thiemann, who has a degree in elementary education from Oregon State University, was a planning committee member for the sexual minority youth conference held in Portland last fall. He is also a steering committee member of the Odyssey Project, which attempts to create a safer environment for all youth in Oregon by increasing their awareness of diversity, and their respect for others regardless of their differences.

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