

local news

It is, unfortunately, déjà vu all over again. Findings of the newly released Metropolitan Human Rights Commission's "Report on Sexual Minority Youth" mirror those found in other state and national reports focusing on queer youth. In a nutshell, it found that gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans youth often experience harassment, violence and discrimination in their schools, homes, churches, employment and in the provision of social services.

"I don't think any of us thought 'Wow, I didn't know that sexual minority youth faced this stuff,'" says MHRC member Nyla McCarthy, who is a lesbian. "I think what makes our report different, however, is that the information is derived from the youth themselves. This was a youth-centered project."

MHRC created a task force designed to address the needs of sexual minority youth following a Sept. 10 commission meeting where Lanny Swerdlow, owner of the long embattled (and now defunct) City Nightclub, claimed that Portland police and city and county officials were harassing and "illegally discriminating" against him and his club.

At the same time, Mayor Vera Katz, Multnomah County and the Governor's Task Force on Teen Suicide were seeking information on the status of sexual minority youth.

MHRC, which is funded by both the city and Multnomah County, works to embrace the dignity of all people. The commission may, in part, gather information about civil and human rights matters. It does not have the authority to investigate claims of possible civil rights violations, nor does it have enforcement powers.

"We're concerned about the needs of sexual minority youth and want to know what can [be done] to address this issue," MHRC chair Lowen Berman told *Just Out* following the September meeting.

MHRC voted unanimously to create the task force and during the next several weeks its members met with sexual minority youth from the metropolitan area via youth support groups, homeless shelters and schools.

Additionally, one-on-one interviews were conducted by phone and in person, and adults with experience dealing with sexual minority youth were invited to offer input.

An estimated 70 youth representing various racial and economic backgrounds participated.

MHRC director Helen Cheek and two commission members attended each of the focus group meetings. A commission delegation interviewed young people at The City Nightclub.

The report also incorporated recommendations from an earlier Massachusetts survey entitled "Making Schools Safe for Gay and Lesbian Youth, Breaking the Silence in Schools and in Families," and a previous statewide report called

Wish list

MHRC has heard the pain and frustration of queer youth—but can anything concrete be done to help?

by Inga Sorensen

"Oregon's Sexual Minority Youth: An At-Risk Population."

The bulk of the MHRC document contains the accounts shared by young people.

"During the course of the project it became evident that the young people were living with a great deal of fear—fear for their personal safety and fear of disclosure resulting in loss of friends, family and jobs," says the report.

Because of that fear, the commission chose

He says, "I felt like Moses when I walked through the halls—everyone parted and cleared a path." Both parents went to administrators, who still failed to act. One counselor was supportive but had no power to do anything. The boy's attendance declined and he finally transferred to an alternative school.

• An African American lesbian had "lesbian nigger" written on her locker. The school had the locker cleaned but failed to address the harass-

ment. When it came specifically to trans youth, the need for education was called for repeatedly.

"Information on homosexuality is available in some schools, but information on transsexualism is not," says the report. "'We're not gay,' was emphasized."

MHRC reiterated recommendations put forth in the Massachusetts survey. They include establishing school policies protecting sexual minority youth from harassment, violence and discrimination; staff trainings in crisis intervention and violence prevention; creating school-based support groups for sexual minority youth and straight students to foster understanding; and the incorporation of sexual minority-related materials in school libraries and curricula.

The MHRC report implored state and local governments to pass legislation extending civil rights protections to all sexual minorities, including gay men, lesbians, bisexuals and trans people.

It also recommended that the City of Portland and Multnomah County work together with the private sector to provide a safe place for sexual minority youth.

Young people suggested the need for a 24-hour safe house, a hot line, an after-school gathering place or community center, and a venue for evening entertainment and/or recreation.

When it comes to the county's responsibility to queer youth, Multnomah County Chair Beverly Stein says don't expect much in the way of tangibles.

"Have you heard of Measure 47?" she says, referring to the cut-and-cap property tax initiative approved by voters in November. "That puts everything on hold. We will not be doing anything new."

State Rep. George Eighmey, meanwhile, is crafting a bill this session designed to protect sexual minority youth from harassment and discrimination in Oregon schools. (He's asking young people who have experienced abuse in schools due to their sexual orientation to contact him.)

Jack Bierwirth, superintendent of Portland Public Schools, has directed schools to complete staff training on issues of particular relevance to sexual minority youth by year's end.

According to MHRC's McCarthy, Bierwirth recently met with members of the sexual minority community and "reiterated his commitment" to making the school system safer and more responsive to the needs of queer youth.

A meeting between district officials and sexual minority parents was also set for early February.

To obtain a copy of the MHRC report, call 823-5136. Sexual minority youth who wish to share stories about school-related harassment are asked to contact Eighmey at 986-1414.



Youths outside the former City Nightclub

not to include any names or specify any groups or schools that were being discussed.

The following are just a few examples of the stories shared by sexual minority youth:

• A young man at a large suburban high school was the only out gay student at the school. When he reported verbal harassment, the administration said, "Boys will be boys." The gay youth suggested to the administration that a forum be presented for the school. The request was denied for fear of a community backlash. The principal also said it was "so minute a problem" it didn't need addressing.

The student was called "faggot" constantly and treated "like a freak."

At the same school a gay male had "fag" written on his locker. Administrators made an announcement that "hazing" was not allowed. The young man, however, views the abuse as harassment, not "hazing."

• A young man who came out at 13 is now homeless because he is no longer accepted at home.

Some youth cited incidents of mistreatment by medical personnel. One young gay man was treated in a demeaning manner when he was hospitalized for mononucleosis. A physician reportedly mocked him and said: "Well, I suppose you have AIDS."



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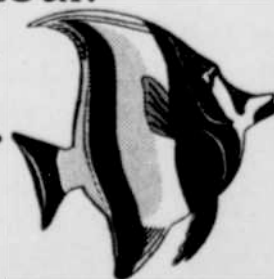
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