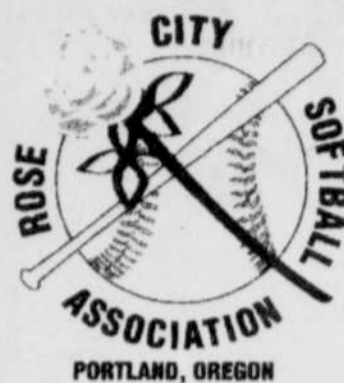


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How can we help?

Multnomah County sits down to chat about ways it can facilitate opportunities for sexual minority youth

by Inga Sorensen

It's not so much that the content of the stories was so striking, but rather the raw honesty with which they were told. So says Lorenzo Poe, director of the Multnomah County Department of Community and Family Services.

He and a handful of sexual minority youth, concerned citizens, and other social service providers, came together in late February for what in essence became an informal chat session at Metropolitan Community Church in Northeast Portland.

Participants plunked down on the couches and floor and shared their stories with Poe, whose department has sponsored similar community forums for other marginalized communities, but no such sitdown with queer youth—until now, that is.

Six sexual minority youth—three young women and three young men—talked candidly about their experiences as queer youth at school, on the streets, with family and community.

According to Poe, the gathering was a way to open up the lines of communication with queer youth and learn how the county may play a role in assisting these young people.

"Nothing really surprised me in terms of the challenges they face," he says. "However, I was surprised by the level of pain and urgency I heard in some of their stories."

He adds youth expressed a desire "for some common sense things" such as a place where they can come together to socialize.

Chris White, an out lesbian who handles contracts and evaluations for the county Department of Community and Family Services, helped orchestrate the meeting along with co-worker Jo Storsberg.

"We felt that queer youth issues were not getting heard all the way up through management. We wanted [Poe] to have a picture of these kids in his mind and our goal was to help paint that picture," she says.

White says the two-hour event was situated in a cozy setting—MCC's family room. To keep the discussion comfortable and flowing, attendees were asked to talk about why they were there rather than what they do for a living (or what their professional stake may be).

Jim Clay, a staffer with the Multnomah County Commission on Children and Families, likened the evening to a "roving conversation" that allowed young people to speak freely about their experiences.

"[MCC's the] Reverend Roy Cole asked if the adults could step back and let the young people take the floor and everyone took him up on that," he says.

According to Storsberg, a lesbian mother shared her concerns about the lack of safe social options for her 14-year-old lesbian daughter. One young man talked about his gay foster parents.

"It shouldn't be so incredible that a [gay] youth has gay foster parents. That's the way it should be," Storsberg says.

According to White, the three young women—who attend Lincoln, Grant and Catlin Gable schools—"are out to varying degrees." She says that each of the young men had at some point been kicked out of unsupportive homes.

One youth offered his account of life on the streets, which included the need to occasionally prostitute for survival.

"He talked about how incredible it was for him to be sitting in a room with 20 gay men and lesbians who were healthy and successful—like it was something he had never experienced before," says White. "His story drove home the point of why we were there."

One of the lesbian youth, meanwhile, said she felt enormous support from the dyke community.

There was little talk of tight budgets and funding issues facing government.

"This was aimed at making levels of government aware of these young people," says White. "Our department serves children and families and that has got to include these young people and their families."

Poe agrees, and maintains he wants to learn more: "What is our role? How can we assist?"

He also says even though there is a push to slash budgets due to the passage of Measure 47, a cut-and-cap property tax limitation measure approved by voters last November, government



Citizens and social service providers met at Metropolitan Community Church in Portland

should assess how it spends (and possibly redirect) its existing dollars.

According to Storsberg, the county currently provides funding to support a case manager who specifically works with queer youth, as well as to various sexual minority youth groups and Outside In.

Others suggest that the adult gay and lesbian community take a more active role in reaching out to queer youth and provide resources to meet their needs.

"This is in the truest sense a collaborative effort," Poe says, adding that the next step may be to "go back to the group and identify people" who want to further explore ways to improve the opportunities for sexual minority youth.

"Our job in part may be to facilitate that," he says.

PHOTO BY LINDA KLEIVER