

local news

The next generation

Youth and supportive adults convene to co-create a safer way to grow up gay

by Buffy Adams

The Fourth Regional Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Youth Conference took place April 25 and 26; the theme was "Creating Safety for All Youth." This year's conference was both fun and informative. There were activities, entertaining speakers, workshops and performances—both theatrical and musical—by, for and about queer youth. The conference was sponsored by Somos Orgullo Latino, Phoenix Rising, Cascade AIDS Project, the Urban League of Portland, the Metropolitan Community Church of Portland, and Washington County Health and Human Services.

The conference began with a powerful keynote address by Kevin Jennings, executive director of the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Teachers Network. He made several good points on homosexuality in schools. He pointed out how the people who work in schools and people throughout the world need to open their eyes and really look at what's going on around them.

"We are fighting to let the light in, not the darkness of bigotry," he said. Then he had helpers open all the blinds in the room, and he said, "Let the light in. The people out there are the ones in the dark."

He related a few of his own experiences that dealt with the way youth are treated in society. He said that queer youth need to be more comfortable in school instead of always feeling left out or afraid.

"People who are not professionals should stay away from children. You have to check your prejudices at the door," he said.

Another interesting thing Jennings did was have everyone check the clothing of their neighbor, and he then had those wearing blended fibers stand up. He pointed out that the Bible said the people who were standing should be stoned to death. He said if you're going to take the Bible literally, then take the entire Bible literally.

Jennings nailed the issue of queer youth in education perfectly in his address. He said all through history one group of people would condemn another, based solely on their beliefs or their opinions. And the point he made most clearly was that schools don't take the time to realize that

queer youth are just as human and need just as much support as straight youth.

There were many workshops and theatrical presentations at the conference, and it was impossible to attend all of them. There was more information than could comfortably be pushed into two days—each workshop was one and a half to two hours long.

"Domestic and Dating Violence Between Same-Sex Couples" detailed the cycles that abusive relationships go through, and how to spot them before it's too late. Unfortunately, there

money issues and materialism. A person may be told that if they leave their partner they'll lose all their belongings, their home, their job, etc. The fear of this loss keeps them in the relationship, and that is economic abuse.

"Stories of the Truth: Coming Out Whole" was a large discussion group of adults and youth who were interested in telling their own stories of how they came out and how they were able to deal with the feelings of their loved ones. This was the most touching and emotional workshop at the conference.

sions," and "I've been through that!" were heard.

"Bisexuality: Hearing and Respecting Young Peoples' Experience" was a panel discussion by five youth who explained the myths of bisexuality. The group seemed very interested and quickly realized that bisexuality isn't about sex and sleeping around with whomever one chooses.

One mother in the audience thanked the panel for clearing up her misconceptions. She said she felt that the panel was very informative. The crowd agreed.

"Why Should Queers Care About Racism and Sexism?" was more of an activity than a workshop, at first. Participants were put into groups and given a box of magazines and instructed to make a collage of a diverse world. I found myself in the group that had all the gay magazines and all of the supplies. We were told not to share with the other groups. We did as we were told, and at the end it was explained that while we were in our own little world the other groups were put down and discriminated against. It was very easy to see that when you're given all the instruments to run your life smoothly, things will fly by you and you will not even notice.

PHOTO BY JINOA KLEWER



Youth at the conference, which was held at the Portland Conference Center

aren't enough organizations or resources to help either men or women to get away from these situations. An abusive relationship can have one or all of the following attributes: emotional, physical and economic abuse. Physical abuse is obvious, and many youth think that if they're not being beaten then they're not being abused. That's not true. If a person is being put down a lot and treated like they're nothing unless they're dependent on their partner, that is emotional abuse. Economic abuse is the hardest to recognize; it involves

At the end of the first day there was a performance by Outside In's Gorilla Theater, a theater troupe composed of youth. The troupe performed skits that dealt with real-life issues for them and the world around them. It was an amusing and very believable portrayal of youth confronting gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans issues in their own way. The audience was receptive and clapped loudly after each skit. There was a tremendous amount of feedback from the audience: Comments such as "That guy has great facial expres-

ing to keep that dialogue going between youths and adults."

It would be great if more youth became involved with the conference next year and with the many organizations that provide mentoring, counseling and aid to gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans and questioning youth.

Buffy Adams is working as a youth intern at Just Out through the Private Industry Council employment program.



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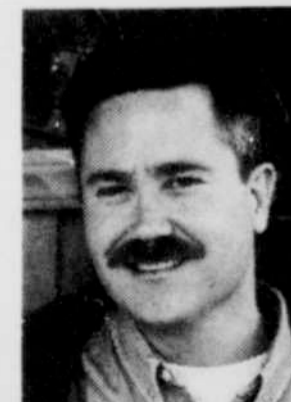
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