

The intentions were good. Pair queer youth with queer adults in the hopes of creating a bonding, beneficial relationship for both.

Phoenix Rising Foundation Inc., a Portland-based agency providing services to the sexual minorities community, asked for that responsibility, and a year and a half ago launched the PRIDE Mentorship and Youth Services Project, a program designed to provide personal and social support to gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans and questioning youth.

An estimated \$35,000 in Multnomah County

One of the county's requirements is that 12 matches be made, and it is insisting that the agency do so by year's end. If not, Li says the contract will be pulled, plain and simple.

In June *Just Out* reported that although the project had then been up and running for nearly a year, only one match had occurred.

Allanya Guenther, the agency's executive director, told us there was "lots of interest expressed by adults, the problem has been attracting youth."

County officials told *Just Out* when the project began that only youth from the west side were being sought as mentees, but since that greatly

sary due to potential liability issues, as well as concerns about undermining a parent-youth relationship.

At the same time, they acknowledge that unlike many populations, queer youth may not be able to safely or comfortably approach their guardians.

(Guenther says minors who would like to participate but believe they can't get permission have been referred to a support group where they can strengthen their communication and problem-solving skills in preparation for coming out—or deciding if, how or when to come out.)

Some have suggested that a more youth-ori-

street corners," he wrote. "Maybe queer youth would have some chance of getting at least some of it."

Guenther defends her agency's record on queer youth, citing for a start the existence of its Youth Speaker's Bureau and the queer youth group, Windfire, which has been meeting since 1978.

She says Phoenix Rising plans to propose that it run the mentorship program on its own—without county funding—come Jan. 1. That plan hinges on whether the agency can raise funds elsewhere.

Guenther will request, however, that the balance of county funds left on the mentoring contract (an amount she estimates at \$18,000) be shifted to the agency's Sexual Minority Youth Recreation and Support Project, an evening and weekend program under development specifically for queer youth that she says would be "safe, supervised, accessible and free."

Guenther says Phoenix Rising is negotiating a lease on a space on East Burnside where queer youth could gather and hang out.

"We want it to be an alternative to the club scene," she says.

Phoenix Rising's predicament calls into question the broader issues of how public funds are being spent, and how queer youth are being served.

Jim Clay is with the Multnomah Commission on Children and Families. (Clay, who is gay, also shares a nonbiological father-son relationship with Hovey.)

He says he'd like to see a widespread community discussion about what resources are available and the ways those resources can best be utilized.

"We could simply ask, 'Does anyone believe we can do better?' I would

love to see a diverse collection of voices come together and create dialogue around this," he says.

Such an approach, Clay adds, has not yet happened—but needs to.

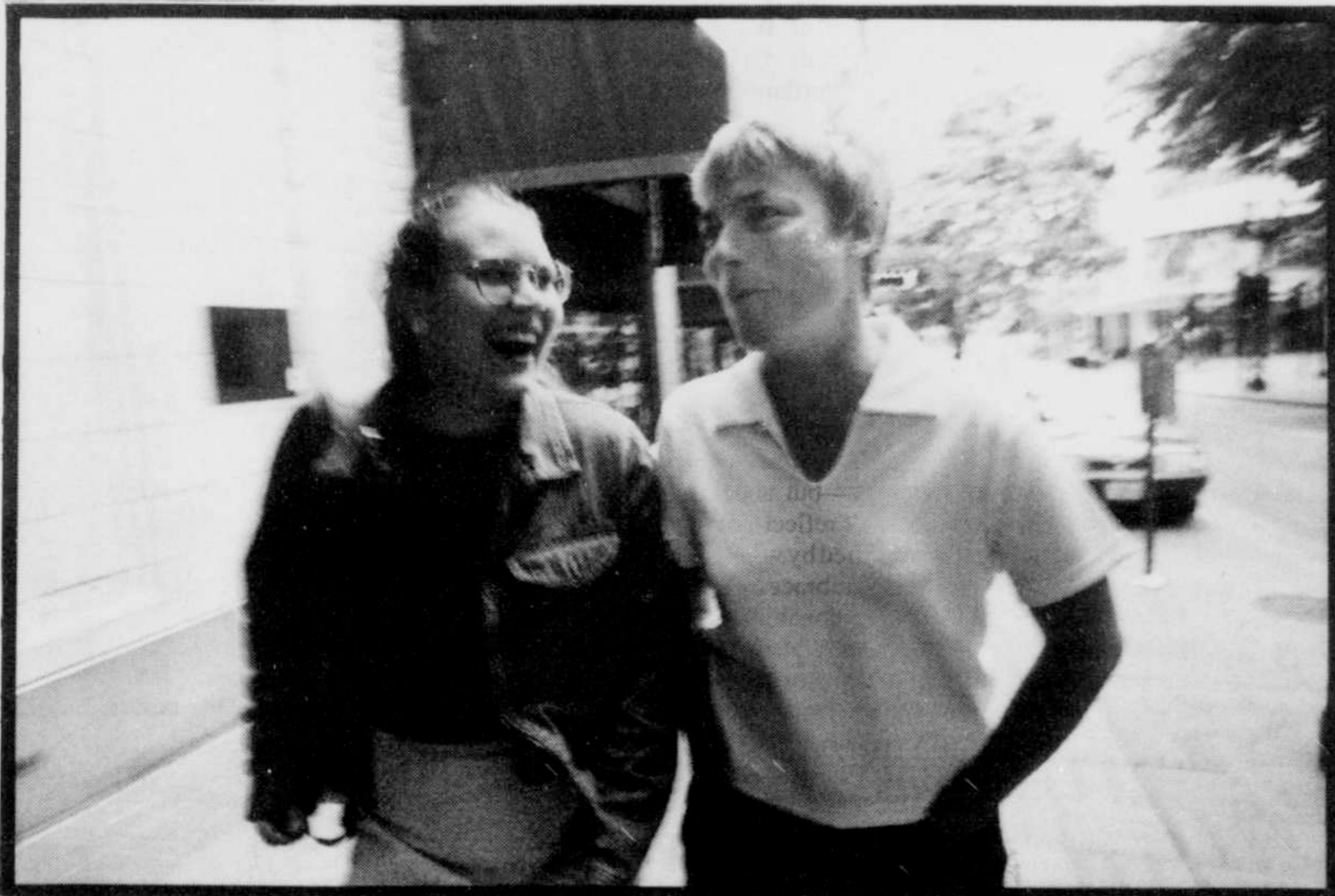
Li agrees, and says an effort is underway to pull together youth service providers and other interested parties to discuss ways to better serve queer youth.

She says a new group, dubbed the Sexual Minority Youth Network, is slated to meet for the first time in mid-December.

"I think we're all aiming for the same thing, and that's providing these young people with what they need," Li says.

The Sexual Minority Youth Network will meet Thursday, Dec. 11, from 4 to 5:30 pm at Portland's Commonwealth Building, 421 SW Sixth Ave., 5th floor. Interested parties are encouraged to attend. For more information, call Tom Ochinerio at 248-3658, ext. 22997.

PHOTO BY LINDA KLEINER



Colleen Larson (left) with mentor Lisa Millet

contracts funded the project from its inception. Backers had hoped to pair 15 mentors and "mentees."

By late November, however, just five matches had been made, with four more pending.

The lack of pairings, among other issues, has prompted county officials to put Phoenix Rising on notice that, come Dec. 31, if specific goals are not met, the contract will be yanked.

"We sat down with Phoenix Rising and had a very frank conversation about whether it was the right agency to handle this or this was the right service for these kids," explains Mary Li, a senior county program development specialist.

Li says she understands that it often takes time for a project such as this to get off the ground. However, she feels Phoenix Rising "needs to turn up the heat" to make more matches.

limited the pool the plan was revised to include all of Multnomah County.

Guenther added that personnel issues at the agency, combined with the need to develop a program infrastructure, hindered outreach to youth.

One of the biggest barriers, however, continues to revolve around parental consent. To partake in the project, queer and questioning youth younger than 18 must obtain written consent from their parents or legal guardians. (Mentees must be between the ages of 13 and 19.)

The mentorship strategies and protocols meet the standards of Big Brothers/Big Sisters, whose rules require legal guardian consent. Li says that component must be in place no matter what agency is administering the project.

Both Li and Guenther say the feature is neces-

sary due to potential liability issues, as well as concerns about undermining a parent-youth relationship.

At the same time, they acknowledge that unlike many populations, queer youth may not be able to safely or comfortably approach their guardians.

(Guenther says minors who would like to participate but believe they can't get permission have been referred to a support group where they can strengthen their communication and problem-solving skills in preparation for coming out—or deciding if, how or when to come out.)

Some have suggested that a more youth-oriented agency or an organization with more reach into the queer youth community would be better equipped to handle this type of mentorship project.

Justin Hovey, a 21-year-old gay man who has participated in Phoenix Rising programs, is one critic of the agency, at least when it comes to queer youth issues.

"They don't take the time to really connect with young people the way places like Cascade AIDS Project, Roots and Branches, Harry's Mother or other places do," he told us in late November.

Several weeks prior, Hovey had sent a letter to *Just Out* voicing concern that Phoenix Rising was receiving thousands of dollars in contracts from the county—as well as thousands more from the Pride Foundation and United Way—for queer youth-related programs.

"Maybe a better idea is to take all the money, in cash, and put it all around the city in buckets on

Are you my mentor?

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by Inga Sorensen

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