

ON THE STICK

Lesbian Avengers take action against queer invisibility and the plight of sexual minority youth in our schools by Inga Sorensen

An explosion of Tootsie Pops tumbled across Lisa Goddard's dining-room table.

Dozens upon dozens of the multi-colored suckers waited to be adorned with fortune-cookie-like tags that shouted "Lick Lesbophobia!" "Lick Homophobia!" "Lick Transphobia!"

And it didn't stop there.

"Florence Nightingale was 'so gay'; she founded modern nursing & she loved women."

"Emperor Wu was 'so gay'; he ruled China & he loved men."

Leonardo da Vinci, Julius Caesar, Virginia Woolf, Chief Crazy Horse, they all got mentions, as did a potpourri of other historical figures thought to have an intimate connection to queerness.

Directly below these mini-history lessons were contact numbers for the Women's Crisis Line and queer resources.

Welcome to the world of the Portland Lesbian Avengers, who on Feb. 20 will kick off several days of lollypopping actions at public high schools in the Portland metropolitan area.

If all goes as planned, an estimated 2,000 Tootsie Pops—and their queer-friendly messages—will wind up in the hands of students heading in and out of school.

Ten days before the first action, a handful of Avengers have collected at Goddard's Southeast Portland home to finish sticking their Tootsie Pops and discuss strategies.

Pressing questions like "Do we want to have a [Lesbian Avengers] banner with us?" intermingle with the less-formidable "Where did the humus go?"

The humus is quickly found; the banner issue, however, is not so easily resolved.

And it's no small matter. After all, Avengers—with their bomb-like logo and "We Recruit" slogan, not to mention the name alone—have a tendency to make some people pretty nervous.

"We scare people," Goddard says bluntly. At 32, she is the eldest Avenger among this particular group. Most are in their mid-20s, though one is still a teen.

According to their handbook, Avengers employ "grass-roots activism to fight for the survival and visibility of lesbians, bi women and trans dykes."

With chapters nationwide, Avengers utilize dyke power and vision to ignite bold, sexy, flamboyant actions. In Portland, Avengers, among other tasks, lollypop, protest the likes of the Portland Fellowship and Promise Keepers, and orchestrate the feisty Dyke March held annually on the eve of the Pride parade.

"Avenger Philosophy 101" instructs us that direct action, humor and theatrics, girl gangs and flamboyance are "in." Making things happen—rather than simply griping—is what these girls are about.

The "out" list, meanwhile, includes endless discussion, processing, "nice girls don't..." and getting permission.

In preparation for the lollypop action, the Avengers have scoured resources that provided them with the names of famous people believed to be queer—a fact usually omitted from students' lessons.

"I checked out every book in the public library," says Avenger Nerissa Ediza, 24.

Lollypop committee head Alison Cashman, 28, herself a teacher for a suburban school district, gleaned other data from the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network Web page.

About \$130 in Tootsie Pops were purchased—a lofty expenditure for the Avengers.

Ten schools have been chosen for the actions, which should last about 20 minutes each. Some will occur as school is about to begin, the others right after.

According to Ediza, the action hit list was crafted after the Avengers called a slew of



Avengers (from left) Cortney Harding, Lisa Goddard, Alison Cashman, Nerissa Ediza and Linnea Johnson

schools to inquire about the queer-friendliness of each. Some Avengers said they had young queer relatives moving to town and wanted to know whether the school would be a safe place for them.

The schools deemed less friendly made the list.

"We're just going to stand out there as kids come and go and say, 'Hey, have a lollypop,'" explains Ediza.

An informational packet will also be dropped at the principal's office. It will include a letter that states: "The Lesbian Avengers' goal is to ensure the survival of queer youth and we want to support the efforts of your school to do the same. You are in a position to educate your staff on how to interrupt anti-gay harassment and on how to include the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people in the curriculum."

The missive then offers tips about ways administrators can "increase the well-being of queer students," including instructing staff how to intervene when homophobic comments are made in school, developing policies for reporting and prosecuting students and staff for homophobic harassment and violence, and establishing confidential support groups for queer youth as well as gay/straight alliances to open the lines of communication between straight and queer students and staff.

"We're not there to make a scene," says Goddard, "it's about making a difference."

■ To learn more, call the PORTLAND LESBIAN AVENGERS hot line at 452-5408.



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