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LOCAL news

REC 'N' ROLL

Queer youth create rooms of their own for an alternative teen scene by Zanna Gibbs

Remember what it was like growing up queer? Well, it's not the same today.

Ever wonder where the queer kids hang out? Ever wonder why there isn't a safe space for us to go that serves our specific needs? This is what we, the queer kids in question, wondered and why we have started a queer youth drop-in center in Portland called the Sexual Minority Youth Recreation Center.

Queer youth often don't get the same financial, family and social support their straight counterparts enjoy. Youth without money, and often without home support, as well as those who do have this help, need a safe place to go where they are wanted and respected. Coffee

ed a lot of work; thus began an extensive outreach to volunteers and eager queer youth to begin renovations.

Almost all the work was done by volunteers from the community and the SMYRC youth steering committee. Work parties were held regularly from January onward. Although there was lots of socializing, plenty of Pearl Jam and mass pizza consumption, lots of work got done and the place looks great.

There is a large recreation room, a lounge and library room, a kitchen, two bathrooms, two offices, a huge basement and a room we call the lavender room, because that's the color it's painted.

At first the center was called SMYRF—



A gathering at the soon-to-open Sexual Minority Youth Recreation Center

shops cost money, dance clubs aren't always open, and the cops don't want us on the streets.

Many of us have been harassed and even ticketed by the police for doing things at Pioneer Courthouse Square like bike riding, skateboarding and even just sitting on the edge of the planter boxes.

Portland is a fairly queer-friendly city, but at the same time it is a place that lacks certain resources for gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans identifying people, especially youth. It's not that we aren't out there, it's that there aren't enough resources unifying us or giving us a sense of community and support.

Em Sangrey, 17, and Britta Houser, 14, along with other youths from a Phoenix Rising Foundation youth group, realized there was a need for *something* in Portland that could unify and support queer youth.

They wanted a space where queer youth could socialize, hold meetings and have access to resources. They wanted something that wasn't a dance club or a coffee shop. They wanted a place that was free and met their needs.

The youths shared their idea with Allanya Guenther, Phoenix Rising Foundation's executive director, and together they submitted a grant proposal to United Way, which provided \$40,000 of seed money for the project. Pride Foundation and Multnomah County have also contributed toward start-up costs.

Locating a suitable space was the next task. A space was found in December on East Burnside Street, just over the bridge from downtown Portland. Ideally, queer youth wanted to have a center downtown, but rent there was too high.

The space made up for its location in its amazing shape and size. Unfortunately, it need-

Sexual Minority Youth Recreation Facility—but after receiving a complaint from the company that makes toy Smurfs, we changed the name to SMYRC.

SMYRC will be open initially on Fridays and Saturdays for drop-in activities from 4 p.m. to midnight. The space will provide queer youth aged 23 and younger with a drop-in center, pool table, computers, movies, queer community resources and a meeting space.

Other Phoenix Rising youth-related services will be run from SMYRC, including social and support groups, the Youth Speakers Bureau and the Pride Mentorship Project.

Many different youth groups—such as an art group, a trans group and a group for queer girls—will be moving in when the center opens up.

Queer youth will have a place that is ours: a space we initiated, planned, worked on and created. It is by youth and for youth.

A grand opening celebration will be held May 9. It will include a queer youth art and performance show, along with a bake sale fundraiser. Anyone and everyone from the lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans community, as well as their supporters, are invited to come celebrate, see the SMYRC space and meet the people involved in creating it.

The center is located at 424 E. Burnside St. in Portland, between Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard and Grand Avenue. The party will be held at the center from 4 to 7 p.m. For more information, call Phoenix Rising Foundation at 223-8299.

■ ZANNA GIBBS is a queer youth activist and SMYRC youth steering committee member, as is Em Sangrey, who contributed to this report.

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down the

other

side.



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