

YOUTH SHOW THE WAY

The Sexual Minority Youth Network and Love Makes a Family team up to write a bright new chapter for queer youth by Inga Sorensen



A Sexual Minority Youth Network meeting

When the Sexual Minority Youth Network first met in mid-December, it featured a feisty interchange among its three dozen participants, many of whom were teenagers who expressed frustration with business as usual.

For them, the status quo equaled controlling adults who tossed dictates at kids. Often times the espousals took the form of "This is good for you" or "This is what you need." The grown-ups wrote the rules and had a lock on the purse strings.

"Lots of youth basically said they felt like they weren't being heard," says Melissa Rudd, 21, a queer youth activist.

The overwhelming sentiment voiced by young people during the gathering, which was sponsored by Multnomah County, was that youth needed more say in determining what their own needs were, as well as ways to meet those needs.

"You could hear and see the frustration, but something really exciting has come about since then," says Rudd, who has worked with, among others, Outside In and Phoenix Rising Foundation. "Younger people now have a way to make some decisions."

The Sexual Minority Youth Network, under the auspices of Multnomah County, was established to help foster better communication about and more effective delivery of services to queer youth.

The county recently awarded a \$20,000 contract to Love Makes a Family, Inc., to become the network's official facilitator.

According to county program development specialist Tom Ochiner, the county was looking for a provider who had the "experience and ability to provide services in a manner which is culturally competent," as well as an "awareness of differences among sexual minority youth" and "credibility in the community."

Among other points, the contract recipient is expected to: mobilize a full range of network partners, including sexual minority youth, clergy, business representatives, service providers, policy makers and others; enable youth to take an active part in network leadership by providing sufficient training and technical support to ensure that activities occur *with* youth, not *for* youth; remove barriers to participation by youth through provision of stipends, options for transportation, selection of youth-friendly meeting times and locations, as well as other means acceptable to youth that enable them to fully participate in network activities; and help create a comprehensive agenda for queer youth issues,

develop the network's ability to articulate its agenda, and assist members in going to policy makers to advocate for putting time, effort and money toward that agenda.

According to its mission statement, Love Makes a Family aims to "provide a public voice for all families, especially those subjected to social, economic and legal discrimination due to sexual orientation or gender identity/expression."

Its goals include building a "strong community of families headed by or including sexual minorities and those supportive of our families," and creating a climate "accepting of sexual diversity through providing information, sharing our experiences and speaking persuasively in public."

The group, which was incorporated in 1993, was a driving force behind two coalitions focusing on sexual minority issues: the Oregon Freedom to Marry Coalition and the Portland Public Schools Sexual Minority Parents Advisory Group.

Sexual Minority Youth Network meetings will initially take place at Love Makes a Family's office, which is located in Union Station in downtown Portland.

According to Rudd, the network is currently developing a council of representatives comprised of queer youth and service providers who will lend support to youth and the agencies serving them, and produce an institutional analysis of the changes needed to increase support for sexual minority youth.

An individual will be hired to be the part-time network coordinator, and sexual minority youth are being encouraged to apply. There will also be a stipendiary teen internship supporting the coordinator.

"This is a unique opportunity for youth, lots of whom have been asking for something like this," says Rudd. "We can essentially make this what we want it to be. I'm thrilled about the possibilities."

Love Makes a Family's proposal was created in consultation with most of the primary agencies serving sexual minority youth in Multnomah County, including Phoenix Rising Foundation, Outside In, the Sexual Minority Youth Recreation Center, Metropolitan Community Church of Portland, Brother to Brother, Portland Public Schools, Lesbian Community Project, and Roots and Branches.

■ The next meeting of the SEXUAL MINORITY YOUTH NETWORK is slated for May 5 at 6 pm in Room 256, Union Station, 800 NW Sixth Ave. in Portland. For more information, call 228-3892 or 227-1981.



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