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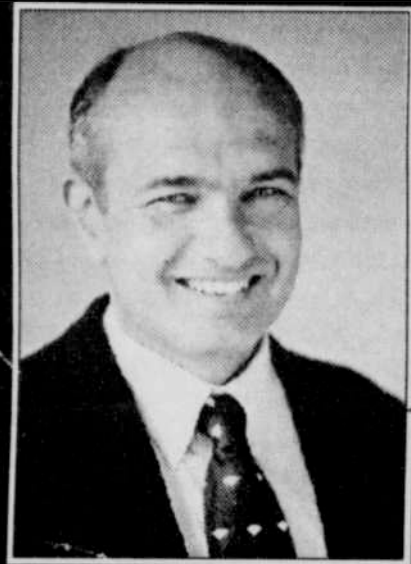
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LOCAL news

FOLLOW THE LEADER

Is your life lacking direction? Take a cue from Cassie Manley,
a young activist with a dream, a plan and a head start by Grace Pastine

In July, 16-year-old Cassie Manley joined hundreds of other queer young people at the fourth annual *Young, Loud and Proud Youth Leadership Conference* in San Francisco, a gathering designed to help lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and questioning youth access resources and become leaders in their communities.

Manley attended with her mentor, Kathy Belge, a case manager for the youth counseling service Roots and Branches, and three other young people from the Portland area, including her best friend, Crystal Lucero.

At the conference, Manley and Lucero led a well-attended, high-energy, interactive theater workshop. The lively group got so rowdy that folks attending the leather discussion next door had to ask them to quiet down.

In addition to Manley's presentation, the conference—which was sponsored in part by the National Youth Advocacy Coalition—hosted more than 60 workshops, a resource fair, art projects, numerous discussion groups and a dance party.

Workshops spanned an array of topics, from sexuality, racism and grass-roots organizing, to writing a résumé.

For Manley, one of the highlights was the acrobatic stilt-walking workshop she attended at the Mission High School athletic field.

There was also a movie room playing queer movies and television clips all day, and a "chill room" that was available for anyone who wanted to relax and just, well, chill for a while.

In Portland, Manley likes to go to raves, decorate her room, and hang out with her best friend. She wants to marry Tori Amos, and her taste for the theatrical extends to her wardrobe—Manley has five wigs in colors such as purple and bright orange. With creative flair, she crafted a backpack out of a pink Mr. Bubbles soap box, attaching shoulder straps and decorative pink feathers.

"Make sure you write [that] I love glitter," she adds as she gives me a tour of her tidy, eclectically-decorated room, complete with a *Masters of the Universe* bedspread and a blue bike in the corner. "Glitter's really fun."

But there is also a serious side to Manley's life. At 13, she ran away and was homeless for a brief spell. (Manley prefers not to discuss the details of why she left home.) Although for some time her parents didn't know where she was, these days she talks with them regularly.

"I love them, I just don't want to live with them," Manley says candidly.

Still, she admits the responsibility of being self-supporting at such a young age has its drawbacks: "Maybe I'm kind of cheated because I didn't get to live like other kids," Manley says, "but that's what I did."

Manley works 40 hours a week between two jobs—about 35 hours a week at a fast-food restaurant, and the rest of the time as a youth worker at the Youth Services Consortium, where, she proudly mentions, she has her own desk, nameplate and telephone extension.

Manley says supporting herself has given her

a measure of maturity. She turns a practical eye on the somber realities of adulthood.

"When you can do everything, you don't do it because you have to go to work in the morning," she says.

Manley also manages to find time to study for the General Education Diploma, and she and Lucero are spearheading a new queer youth theater group.

To keep it all flowing, Manley gets some assistance from the likes of Belge, with whom she meets to discuss her goals and problems, as well as a potpourri of other matters.

The Equity Foundation, a Portland-based foundation that provides funding to queer-supporting projects, recently gave Manley a grant to attend the *Power of Hope Conference*, another conference for youth leaders. Manley says she also received a scholarship to study at the Portland Actors Conservatory, but has had to take a leave of absence because she has to work so much.

Manley has been involved for more than three years with Gorilla Theater, a youth theater

PHOTO BY LINDA KLEWER



Cassie Manley

group organized by Outside In, a Portland-based agency that provides assistance to at-risk youth. She hopes to combine her love of acting with her desire to reach out to other queer young people.

She says she'd like to see an alternative to the clubs, coffee shops and drop-in centers that are currently available to queer youth.

Eventually, Manley wants to study theater in college, live in a loft, have a dog, and run a clothing store where she would sell, among other wares, glitter and funky jewelry.

For now, however, she's looking forward to moving out of the large house she shares with seven other young people and into her own apartment. She's already planning the decor: Although Manley loves hardwood floors, she is considering covering the floor with Astroturf.

"It'd be scratchy, but I think it would be cute," she says.