

**LOCAL news**

**THE GIFT OF GAB**

*Continued from the cover*

The project, propped up by funding from the Equity Foundation and McKenzie River Gathering Foundation, was launched in the early spring by Pride Northwest Inc., organizer of Portland's annual queer pride parade and festival.

As the project was getting off the ground, Pride Northwest board member Kristan Aspen talked about the emotional slashes left on many people following the Oregon Citizens Alliance's anti-gay campaigns. The damage she was discussing, however, was not inflicted by OCA leader Lon Mabon and his cronies—it instead dealt with divisions *within* the queer community.

Others shared Aspen's assessment that many queers—trans people and leather enthusiasts, people of color, anyone “who didn't look and act like a straight, white banker”—were essentially shunted aside and discouraged from too-public involvement in the 1992 campaign to defeat the OCA's ballot measure, as well as a similar effort two years later. Some critics said it was a “sanitization strategy” that further alienated already marginalized sectors within the queer community.

The Conversations Project was conceived as a way to begin healing those wounds.

“By coming together in small groups we can create safe spaces to listen to each other, learn from each other, heal our divisions, and help weave a stronger community,” says the project's mission statement.

So how does it work? A conversation begins with two people from an identified constituency group and two people from the queer community at large. A facilitator is present to keep the conversation focused and safe for all involved. After a few meetings, the conversation expands “in a way that is comfortable for the constituency group.” After a handful of meetings of the larger group, the “constituency group [plans] a public presentation with the invited support or participation of the other members of the conversation.”

The conversations last an estimated eight weeks. The project's ground rules stipulate participants speak from their own experiences, listen respectfully without interrupting, and engage in no personal attacks.

The project began with four groups. One, involving African American gay men and queers who are not African American, is still meeting.

Three of the initial groups were composed of trans people and nontrans queer people. One of these has been disbanded; the other two have completed the conversation segment and are now preparing a public presentation.

This is not a typical November night. The rain is beating down more intensely than usual; the driving winds have snapped power lines, affecting tens of thousands.

Yet here at the Interstate Firehouse Cultural Center in North Portland, surrounded by art and the rise and fall of actors' voices from across the hall, a harmoniousness pervades.

For the past two months, 15 members of the project's two completed trans groups have been planning and rehearsing for their theatrical presentation entitled *Transparencies*, a “synthesis of personal stories, experiences, interactions and awarenesses brought to the Conversations Project and taken from it.”

About a dozen people are here this night, despite Mother Nature's rambunctiousness. They're gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual and transgender—a people potpourri.

Aspen, a longtime fixture in the lesbian community, is among the crew, as is Lori Buckwalter, a trans activist.

The two stand face to face, while everyone else sits in a wide circle on folding chairs.

Aspen is playing the part of the manager of a “family” restaurant. Buckwalter, meanwhile, is acting as a job seeker responding to the eatery's help wanted sign.

“Hi, can I help you?” asks Aspen.

Taken aback in a sad and nuanced way, Buckwalter offers this: “I have a family.”

There is a moment of silence as the effect permeates the room, then the onlookers break out in applause.

It sounds really good. Still, Judith Yeckel, IFCC's artistic director—who is guiding this production—calls for another run through, followed by another.

In a warm and friendly way, she and other production members serve up suggestions: Aspen sounded *too nice*. Pause here, don't pause there.

Finally, the porridge is just right.

At the end of the evening after everyone has headed out into the elements, Eric Tyler, a female-to-male transsexual, takes a moment to reflect on the Conversations Project.

Tyler, 42, began seriously pondering the possibility of gender reassignment about two years ago. At the time, he was living as a lesbian, yet he knew something just didn't fit. In short, Tyler dug deep inside himself, embarked



Lori Buckwalter (left) and Kristan Aspen rehearse *Transparencies*

Buckwalter, who stands 6-feet-6-inches tall, responds, “I'm here to apply for the waitress position.”

With a flicker of hesitation and a hint of disapproval, Aspen answers, “Oh, well, uh, do you have any experience?”

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Buckwalter tells her she has plenty, at which point Aspen states, “I don't think we have uniforms for someone so tall.”

Buckwalter tells Aspen that's not a problem, she has her own.

Seeing no other way out, Aspen puts it on the table: “Well, I don't think you'd really fit in here—this is a family restaurant.”

upon some research, and concluded gender reassignment was a necessity. About 11 months ago, he began hormone therapy and has since undergone one surgery; another is slated for June.

Today, Tyler is feeling better than ever. Still, he admits his journey has been laced with loss and pain. Some friends have left, but new relationships have been forged. Indeed, Tyler credits the Conversations Project with helping shatter some of the isolation he once felt.

“We share our personal stories,” he says. “It's through this personal stuff where we found our common ground.”

■ *TRANSPARENCIES* is a free theatrical production slated for Thursday, Dec. 10, at 7:30 p.m. at the Interstate Firehouse Cultural Center, 5340 N. Interstate Ave. in Portland. A reception will follow.

Anyone interested in participating in the CONVERSATIONS PROJECT in the future may pick up an application form at the reception, or call Pride Northwest's hot line at 295-9788. New groups will be starting in January, pending receipt of additional funding for the project.

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