

The Sexual Minority Youth Recreation Center is a great place to go if you need a role model. Just don't get confused and look to the adults who are there as volunteers. The role models at this drop-in center for queers 23 and younger are the youths themselves.

"People ask me who the leaders are in Portland's queer community," says Venae Rodriguez, youth services manager for Phoenix Rising Foundation, the mental health agency that operates SMYRC. "It's the youth. The strength they have to be comfortable, confident and out at age 15 blows my mind."

By day, these community leaders—who just happen to be young—can be found going to work and school, writing grants, trying to keep warm and dry on the streets, running workshops as peer educators, making art.

But on Wednesday, Friday and Saturday nights, you'll find them at SMYRC.

"It's like Cheers. Everyone knows your name," assesses Aaron Scott, 17, a member of the youth steering committee that guides this unique facility on the east end of the Burnside Bridge. "People come here just to chill."

On a recent Friday night, a steady flow of trans, bi, lesbian, gay and questioning youths munch carrots and cookies while hanging out to register their observations about SMYRC.

Some come for the art opening, an installation of black-and-white photographs by Trish Phillips. Others linger after attending the weekly art, writing and activity group, Personal Deity Proxy, that meets in a room at the rear of the facility.

The couches in the lounge area of the cavernous space host a constantly shifting constellation of solo readers, pairs and trios in quiet conversation, and others who just sit back and take it all in.

In the computer area, Tiffany Lavender, a 23-year-old theology student, strokes stray strands of hair with elegant fingers as she discusses plans for SMYRC's new Web site, while several youth log on to the Internet.

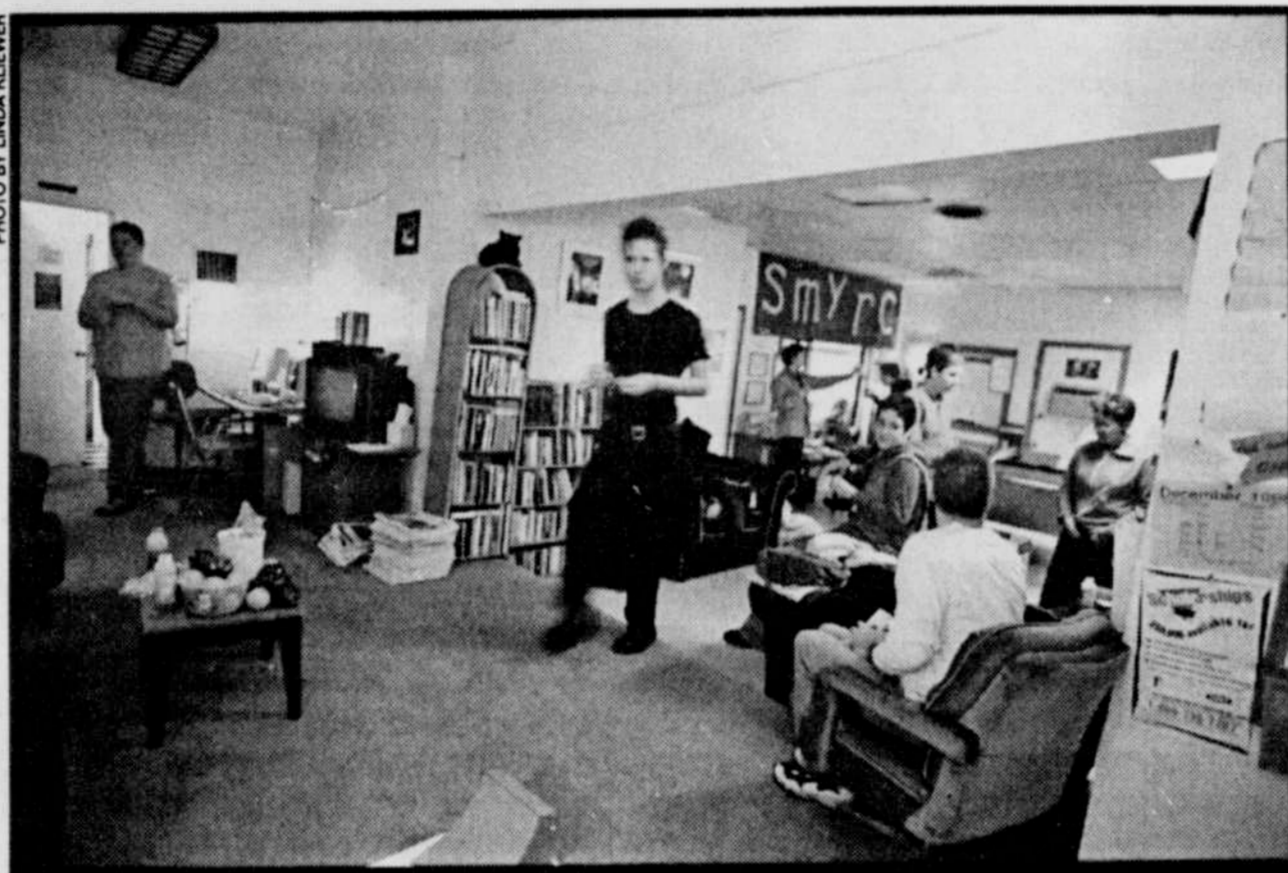
When the action at the pool table falls silent for a moment, a lone player racks up the balls and breaks them, then walks away until someone else saunters by to take up a cue.

But despite all the attractions at SMYRC, this night the biggest draw is the skateboard park. Yes, a skateboard park for finger boards built from cardboard and clay on the floor in the corner of the lounge, complete with ramps, curbs, and a decapitated casualty for added drama.

How to sum up a place that is nearly unimaginable to most adults who came out when the bars were the only place to go? It's

## SMYRC'S YOUNG TURKS

Queer youths have settled in and made a place for themselves at the Sexual Minority Youth Recreation Center by Holly Pruett



Sure it looks homey, but hanging out isn't the only thing on the agenda at SMYRC

simple: "SMYRC kicks butt," declares Britta Houser, 15.

Houser, a SMYRC founder, likens the creation of SMYRC to having a baby. "We took it from a dirty old tattoo parlor with swastikas on the wall to this warm, welcoming place," she says, proudly gesturing with a carrot stick to the rec room outside the glass-walled office that houses Phoenix Rising's youth service staff.

Along with Em Sangrey, now a college freshman, Houser and other members of their youth group "wanted to make a difference," says Angie Nett, 15, another member of the youth steering committee, whose face is lightly dusted with glitter. "They wanted youth to have power, to have a place that they could run and make decisions."

After partnering with Phoenix Rising, the youth founders put in hours of unpaid work to raise money, find a suitable building and transform it, hire staff, and establish the "by youth, for youth" philosophy and policies that are its backbone.

Seed funding came from a one-time-only \$40,000 United Way grant. Youth and adult volunteers contributed more than \$15,000 in labor and materials.

Rodriguez, a Tacoma native transplanted from Austin, Texas, joined the Phoenix Rising staff just as SMYRC opened and hired youth steering committee member Zanna Gibbs, 23, to staff the rec center.

Gibbs, a k a Zanna Banana, keeps an unobtrusive eye on the door at all times, steers former tattoo parlor customers away, and, as she puts it, "makes sure everyone is safe."

Proving that if you build it, they will come, the grand opening in May was "totally packed," recalls Nett. "The vibe was totally cool. The energy was perfect."

Scott, preppy and earnest compared with some of his grungier cohorts, remembers their first art opening and the party they threw on queer pride weekend.

"Both events were so jammed you couldn't move around. It was mind-blowing to see people having fun and to know that you helped to start it," he says.

Houser adds, "It's astounding what it does for your self-esteem and your self-image."

How does having a place to play pool accomplish all of that? Scott says: "You're judged way less here than anywhere else. Everyone here knows about being different."

Paige Powell, 17, whose abstract paintings were featured in SMYRC's first art show, adds, "It's totally great to hang out somewhere that no one will question you about why you want to have sex with another girl."

Powell came out a year ago in Lake Oswego. In a backwards baseball cap and hooded sweatshirt, looking like the other young dykes dominating the pool table, she remembers, "I thought I was the only gay person on the planet. It's really nice to come here and meet others my age."

On a typical night about 20 youths hang out at the center; most are out but many are closeted or questioning. The majority are between 15 and 19 years old.

While drop-ins come from all parts of town and all types of backgrounds, SMYRC is used by fewer youths of color and street youths than the steering committee would like. Racism, classism, biphobia, transphobia, and the sex industry are all "issues needing to be addressed," says Houser.

Also topping their social change agenda is continued negotiations concerning youth control at SMYRC.

Tusaya, 17—also known as Mr. T and self-described as a "really big trans activist"—gives voice to others' fears: "It's supposed to be a youth place. When older people try to take it away from us, it bothers me."

Working within a mental health agency like Phoenix Rising imposes some constraints on the autonomy of the youths who lead the center. Already a role model for other organizers at 15, Houser offers a pragmatic approach to the persistent tensions: "We're looking for a happy medium. We just need good communication among all parties."

One solution is to hire a youth intern to work with Rodriguez, "to help her make decisions from a youth perspective," as Tusaya sees it.

But that takes money. And that's where adults can be most helpful, according to steering committee members. Their wish list for SMYRC includes funding for expanded hours, the youth intern, and continued improvements to the building, along with donations of "stuff" including computer programs, art supplies, books and videos, curtains and volunteer labor.

"The role most adults want to play is a mentor or parent," reflects Houser. "They want to share their experiences but don't view it as an equal relationship. Come in here and get to know me as a person first."

■ SMYRC is located at 424 E. Burnside St. in Portland. Drop-in hours are Wednesday from 4 to 8 p.m., and Friday and Saturday from 4 p.m. to midnight. For more information, call 872-9664.



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