

**LOCAL news**

# GIVING BACK

**A new program is seeking queer adults to provide shelter and stability for sexual minority kids in need** by Inga Sorensen

**G**reg Berleman calls it the "economic ghettoization" of queer youth.

Three years ago Berleman, a counselor at Franklin High School in Portland, founded a support group for sexual minority students, three of whom would wind up leaving school after unsupportive parents kicked the kids out of their homes.

"They were unable to continue their education because they had to find work in order to pay for rent," he says, adding that such a decision, while necessary for their survival, often lands kids in the depressing world of dead-end jobs spawned by a formal education cut short.

Not long after the formation of Berleman's group, the now-defunct Metropolitan Human Rights Commission released its *Report on Sexual Minority Youth*, which included interviews with an estimated 70 queer young people from throughout the Portland metropolitan area.

In a nutshell, the report found that gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans youths often experience harassment, violence and discrimination in their schools, homes, churches, employment and in the provision of social services. It also found that they often become homeless after their sexual orientation is discovered by their families.

"It was evident that something needed to be done," says Berleman.

Patience and persistence have paid off in the form of a newly-launched campaign to recruit shelter parents to house sexual minority youths. It is a first-time collaboration between two local nonprofit social service and mental health resource agencies: the Boys and Girls Aid Society of Oregon, and the Network Behavioral HealthCare program Roots and Branches.

The Boys and Girls Aid Society of Oregon is a private, nonprofit agency that provides short-term shelter care for children and kids up to age 18. It is the largest private provider of shelter care in Oregon.

Network Behavioral HealthCare, a nonprofit mental health and addiction treatment agency, operates Roots and Branches, a counseling program of comprehensive treatment and case management services for sexual minority youth.

Roots and Branches recently received a grant from the Equity Foundation to support shelter care for sexual minority youth and is collaborating with the Boys and Girls Aid Society to create and maintain culturally-appropriate host homes.

Roots and Branches' Kathy Belge crafted the grant request, and has worked with Berleman and others on this effort.

Like Berleman, Belge has watched queer kids strain to stay in school, find shelter and keep their dreams alive.

"There has been a need for something like this for a long time," says Belge, who hopes the shelter-care program will provide some badly needed relief.

The goal of the campaign is to recruit, certify and train shelter parents to work with sexual minority youths. Though not a requirement, the program hopes to recruit sexual minority adults to house the minors.

"Youths may feel more comfortable [with a sexual minority adult] and have a positive role model within the queer community," Belge explains. "Plus this is an amazing way for sexual minority adults to give back to the community."

According to Elizabeth Chambers of the Boys and Girls Aid Society of Oregon, shelter parents have access to support from counselors 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and are reimbursed for food and other expenses.

Typically youths live with shelter parents for a night or two, but visits may last up 90 days or even longer. Some shelter parents will take kids in the middle of the night, while other homes require more notice. Some homes shelter youths almost continuously, some only occasionally.

Shelter homes are certified by the agency, and parents receive 20 hours of training before they take children into their homes.

Marjory Hamann, 31, became an official shelter parent last May. (At her request, Hamann often houses youth between the ages of 11 and 13 who have been neglected or abused.)

"I had the energy, the space and I wanted kids in my life," says Hamann, who works full time out of the home.

She estimates she has taken in 20 youngsters, sometimes for a few days, sometimes a few weeks.

"It's about opening up my home, being clear about expectations and also giving up some control," says Hamann, adding, "It's not like I'm the adult and they are the child. It's like we're roommates and I'm the adult."

Sometimes they go to movies or dinner together, sometimes they eat in and share dish-washing responsibilities.

Occasionally a youth will act out, but thus far Hamann says she's been able to work through each situation with a young person.

"Some of the youths are struggling with issues, but what I'd really like people to know is just how wonderful and normal these kids are," she says. "It's been a joy for me to do this."

She also likes introducing a sense of stability into often unpredictable lives.

Indeed, shelter-care homes are designed to give youths a nurturing and stable environment while they are in transition.

It's that stability, says Berleman, that may allow sexual minority students to remain in school and finish a semester rather than having to drop out.

"This may give them a chance for a brighter future," he says.

■ For more information on the SHELTER-CARE PROGRAM, call Elizabeth Chambers at 222-9661.



Shelter-care provider Marjory Hamann

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