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DOING IT FOR THEMSELVES

Continued from the cover

From a march against hate violence in Georgia to the youth-led conference in Oregon, thousands of youth activists across the country are taking the lead in organizing for Equality Begins at Home, which takes place March 21 through 27.

Equality Begins at Home is being coordinated by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and organized by the Federation of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Statewide Political Organizations. Organizers are hailing it as the first coordinated political campaign of queer rights actions in all 50 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico.

And queer youth are in the thick of things.

Conference organizers (from left) Zarah Walker, Evil-T, Nerissa Ediza (at computer) and Mr. T chow on chips and dip as they make big plans for Oregon's first statewide queer youth gathering

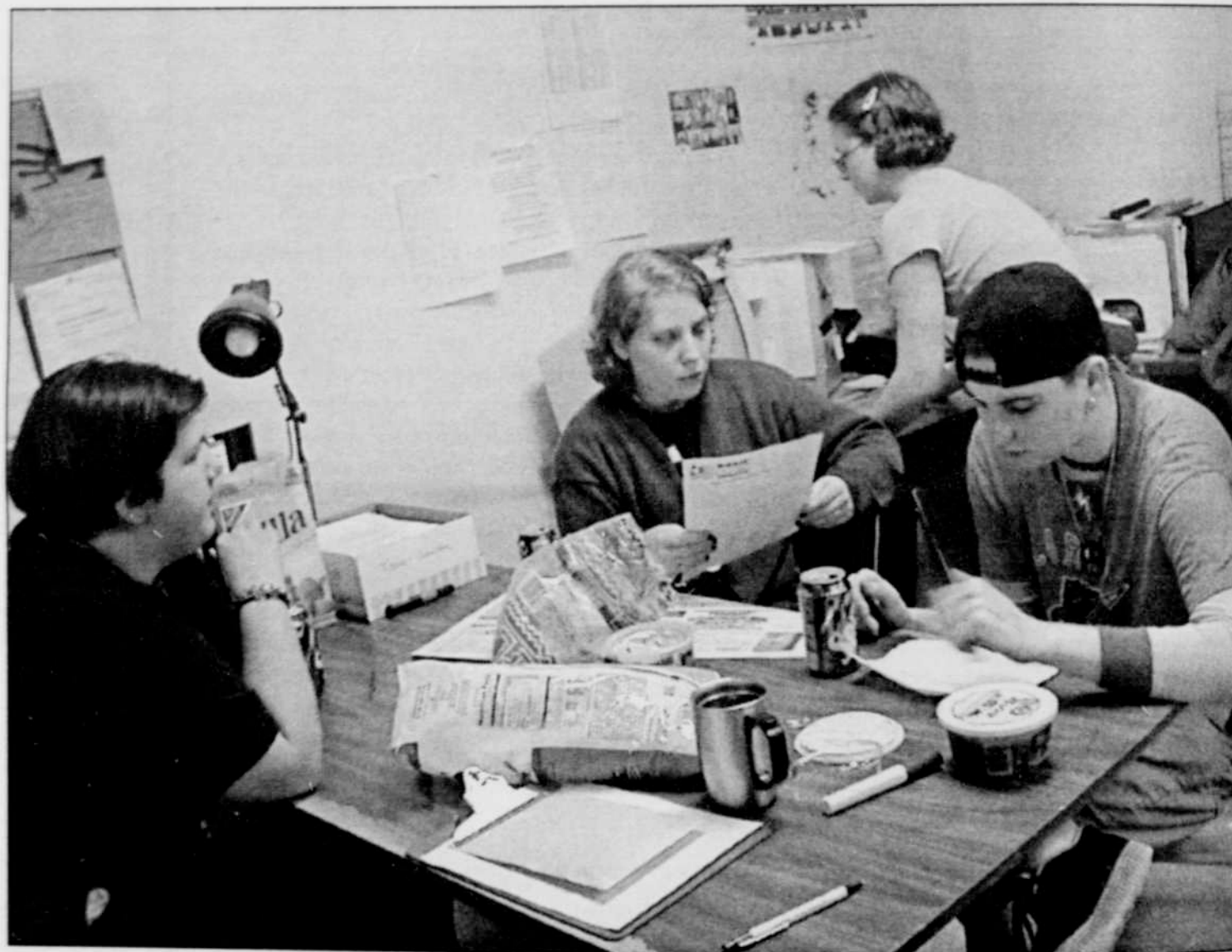


PHOTO BY LINDA KLEWER

"Adult activists are quickly learning that youth can do more than stuff envelopes. These young activists aren't the leaders of our movement tomorrow, they have already been leading the movement," says Rea Carey, executive director of the National Youth Advocacy Coalition, which is supporting the effort.

Kerry Lobel, NGLTF's executive director, adds: "Young people often bear the brunt of homophobia in our country. While they are more exposed to violence and harassment in their schools, in their homes and in the streets, they are also the least protected."

In Oregon, queer youth could be greatly impacted if a proposed ballot initiative successfully makes its way onto next year's general election ballot and gains voter approval. The measure—filed by the ever-tenacious Oregon Citizens Alliance—seeks to block public schools in the state from discussing homosexuality and bisexuality "in a manner which encourages, promotes or sanctions such behaviors."

Given that, Ediza, BRO's volunteer coordinator, says she's encouraged that young people in places like Portland, Eugene, Coos Bay and

Bend are getting involved and meeting regularly to help make the youth conference a reality. (And she acknowledges that BRO, a statewide group leading the charge against a slew of anti-gay measures, is striving to "build a base of youth leaders.")

By conference guidelines, Ediza is characterized as an adult; youth are those 21 and younger. However, over-the-mark supporters are considered allies whose assistance is welcomed.

For her part, Ediza is trying to nail down transportation for youth, arranging meal plans, and shepherding information to and from the different queer youth groups planning the event.

"But this is their conference. It's what they want to make it," she stresses.

Though it is a work in progress, an array of youth-conceived-and-led workshops are on already on tap addressing race, religion, disability, trans and safer-sex issues. There will also be sessions on bisexuality, activism and what it's like to be queer in a rural area. Other activities include an art show, a dance and an open mike.

offer tips to others in rural spots about how they can cope with discrimination, deal with stress and stand up for themselves.

Some youths are bringing a parent, Mr. T included.

"My mom almost cried when I asked her to come," says Mr. T, who will conduct a trans workshop along with his mother and girlfriend.

As soon as he possibly can, Mr. T wants to make the physical transition from female to male. He says transphobia is an occasional hurdle to clear, but notes the toughest part of his day-to-day existence is living in a body that doesn't mesh with who he is.

"That's really hard," says Mr. T.

Walker got involved with the conference as a way to get over an ex-significant other.

"I was feeling sorry for myself," says Walker, who had never before embarked upon such a project. "And I'm loving it." She demonstrates her exuberance by volunteering for no less than 50 million tasks.

Her foray into the world of political activism

"Young people often bear the brunt of homophobia in our country. While they are more exposed to violence and harassment in their schools, in their homes and in the streets, they are also the least protected."

—National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Executive Director Kerry Lobel

An Equality Begins at Home rally will also be held on the steps of the state Capitol.

At night, participants will crash on a YWCA gym floor with their sleeping bags. One area is reserved for the loud crowd, the other for the "I need my sleep" set.

Rick Miller, 19, grew up in Klamath Falls and now attends school at Western Oregon State College in Monmouth, Polk County.

It is a place where some have hassled him because of his sexual orientation. It is a setting where his daily life is "kind of lonely." Still, he stays because he feels it's important gay people follow their hearts—which may not cut a path to the big city.

"If all gays moved to San Francisco, there wouldn't be any diversity," he says.

Miller plans to lead a workshop that will

has been nothing less than "very cool."

Walker's next milestone? On May 18, she turns 18.

"I'll be a voter!" she says, relishing the thought.

■ The CONFERENCE is open to all youth, youth-service providers and their allies. The main goal of the gathering is to find and maintain support for queer youth, youth activists and allies.

The conference will be free, including meals and overnight housing. Transportation, ASL and Spanish language interpreters, and child care will be available, all provided by Basic Rights Oregon.

To register, contact Nerissa Ediza at 222-6151 or via e-mail at bromerissa@aol.com.

A RALLY will be held March 21 from 1 to 4 p.m. on the steps of the state Capitol in Salem.