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LOCAL news

RECONSTRUCTION=RESURRECTION?

Continued from the cover

Most notably, Phoenix Rising Foundation board members focused on their effort to forge an agreement with Network Behavioral HealthCare Inc., a nonprofit agency that provides an array of mental health services.

During the community meeting it became apparent there were many prospective Phoenix Rising supporters who would not cut a check to the agency—no matter how desperately it needed the support—unless some gut-level changes occurred.

In short, it was clear the agency's credibility, and hence its future, was precariously perched—and remains so.

"I feel so betrayed and deceived," says Patti May, a founding board member of Phoenix Rising, who helped launch the agency in the late 1970s by raising funds via *Saturday Night Fever* disco parties and other funky initiatives.

"They knew for months what was going on but didn't tell us. They solicited donations during that time," says an incredulous May, weeks after the revelations emerged. "Until there is a full accounting of what happened, there will be no credibility."

Her statement is echoed by others with whom *Just Out* spoke.

"People want an organization they can trust," May concludes.

"I'm a generalist as an executive director."

It's March 16—nine days before Allanya Guenther is slated to leave her post at Phoenix Rising, and she's explaining why she is stepping down. "Part of my job is to assess what the agency needs," she adds.

And what it needs, she reflects, must come from someone else, someone finely attuned to the ways of managed care, the nitty-gritty details of billing and accounting, as well as the myriad rules and regulations involving the insurance industry—all of which make for an increasingly complex world for a little, independent nonprofit to contend with.

And Guenther's no fool. She understands community confidence in Phoenix Rising has been greatly undermined—if not irreparably shattered in some circles. She knows that if trust is to be rebuilt, she must leave.

Replacing her is Judy Watson, who has experience as a clinician and administrator in behavioral health operations. Watson, who will become interim executive director of Phoenix Rising, works for Network Behavioral Health-

Care, which has served the Portland area since 1980. Network's programs include Roots and Branches, which provides counseling and outreach services to sexual minority young people.

According to Phoenix Rising board member Jerry Keene, Network is a larger, more sophisticated agency with many checks and balances, and greater expertise with managed-care issues. He says the organization is equipped to handle contract reporting requirements, insurance and client billing, and record keeping and monitoring.

Keene, a Portland attorney, adds that his board is still hammering out a contractual agreement with Network, which will determine what role each entity is to play in the other's realm.

He says board members are exploring whether it's possible Phoenix Rising can remain viable and as independent as possible. And they're pondering whether Phoenix Rising needs to close up shop for good.

"And we're looking at everything in between," he tells *Just Out*.

That includes simply contracting with Network to handle administrative duties, or shifting Phoenix Rising's office into a Network facility in order to save on rent, or giving Network more control by allowing some of its representatives onto the Phoenix Rising board, or moving away

from providing adult clinical services and focusing more on youth support programs.

Incorporated as a nonprofit agency in 1978, Phoenix Rising Foundation promotes "the common interests and well-being of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual people through mental health, education and other support services," according to its mission statement.

The agency provides an assortment of adult, youth and HIV counseling services, and runs the Sexual Minority Youth Recreation Center, a Portland drop-in facility for queer kids.

"In the early days, the adult clinical services were used more, but that seems to be changing as the profession as a whole seems to be getting more gay-friendly," explains Keene.

And perhaps more people are more at ease with their sexual orientation. Additionally, fewer people are accessing Phoenix Rising's HIV-related services.

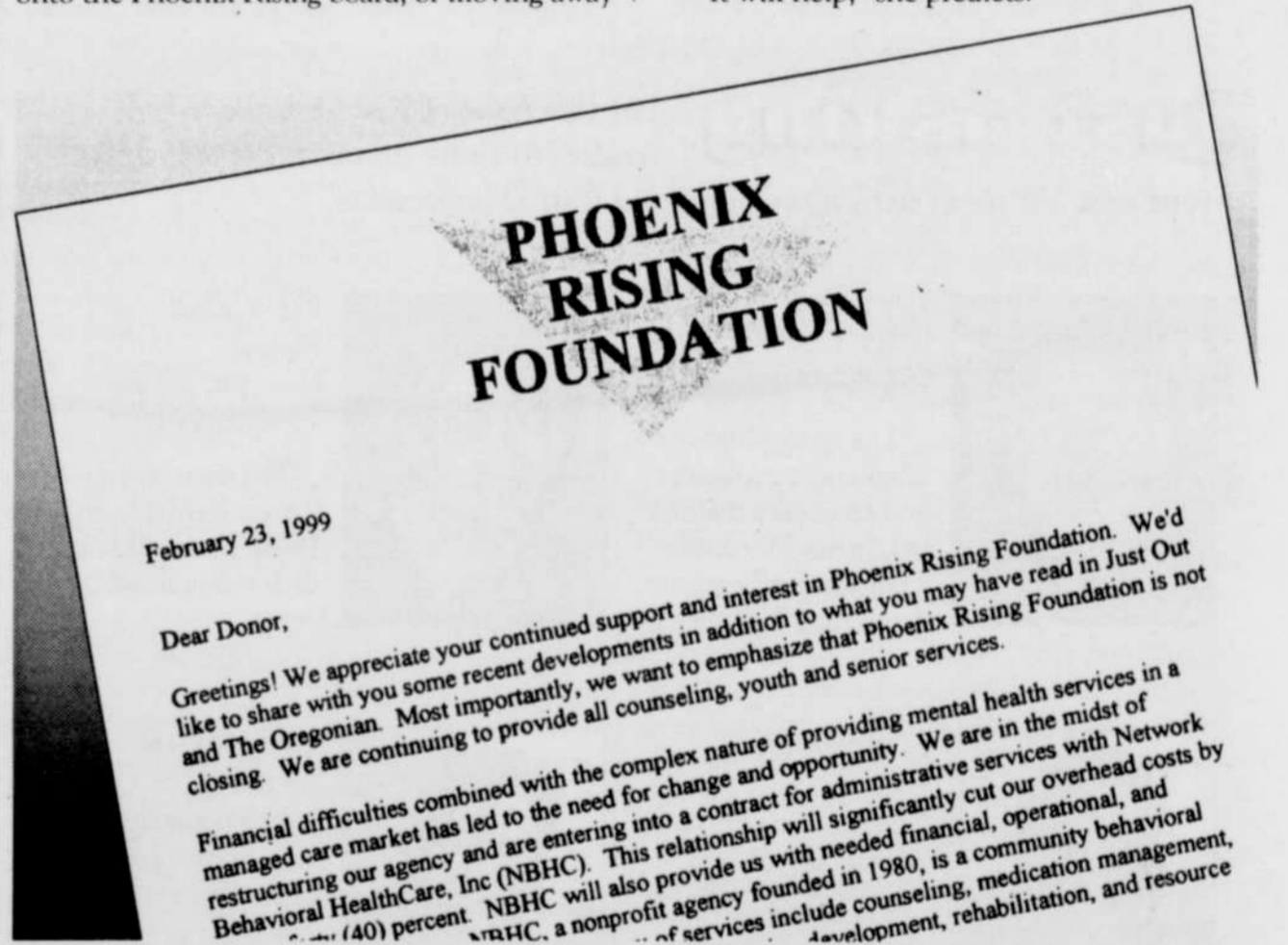
"Times are changing," he says. "We need to look at what our mission is. Is it the same as when Phoenix Rising first started? Maybe not... We just don't have the answer right now."

Watson, meanwhile, says she will manage contracts, program development and oversee day-to-day operations and work to develop "a solid business plan."

Perhaps her toughest mission will be to "keep the spirit alive," as she puts it.

Yet she appears optimistic, believing trust will be regained once the public sees that steps are being taken to restructure the agency.

"It will help," she predicts.



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