

QUEER KIDS AT CAPITOL

The nationwide local-activism project Equality Begins at Home does just that—for all ages by Inga Sorensen

It was totally cool. And a success. So say organizers of what was likely Oregon's first statewide conference orchestrated by and for queer youth.

The event, held March 20 and 21 at Willamette University in Salem, was part of Equality Begins at Home, a national campaign for gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans equality that was coordinated by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and was organized by the Federation of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Statewide Political Organizations.

Equality Begins at Home, which took place in late March, has been hailed as the first coordinated political campaign of queer rights actions in all 50 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico.

In Oregon, roughly 150 youths from Portland; Vancouver, Wash.; Eugene; Salem; Ashland; Coos Bay; McMinnville; Astoria; Monmouth; and Klamath Falls participated in the two-day youth conference, which received backing from Basic Rights Oregon.

According to Nerissa Ediza, BRO's volunteer coordinator, many young people said this was the first conference that "truly focused on youth."

Ediza, 25, adds that only a small handful of adults—defined as anyone older than 21—attended, and most of them were service providers and youth-group leaders.

"Those adults were busy behind the scene chopping vegetables for lunch and patrolling the grounds as security," she tells *Just Out*.

Youth-led workshops abounded; especially well-attended were the workshops on bisexuality and trans issues.

The opening ceremonies included speeches by youths from around the state and a special performance about same-sex domestic violence by the Portland theater group Hip Chicks and Activists. There was also a dance and open mike.

Ediza says most of the youths from the conference attended a March 21 rally on the steps of the state Capitol, which overall drew an estimated 300 demonstrators who cheered at the speeches and danced during a performance by the Portland Taiko Drummers.

"It truly is a wonderful thing that youth and adults could unite to put on such an amazing conference," says Zarah Walker, 17, a Portland youth organizer. "I will never forget the people I've met or the things I've learned, not only over the weekend, but throughout the entire planning of the conference."

A Salem youth—who is unnamed to protect confidentiality—sent an e-mail to BRO saying: "I just wanted to say *thank you* to everyone involved in organizing the conference, and a huge thank you for bringing it to Salem."

"And I also wanted you to know that I wear a small rainbow chain around my neck. I wear this every day, and when I first got it, it was to symbolize the fact that I'm gay. *Gay pride* is great to talk about, but until [the conference], I didn't actually know what the words *gay pride* meant. It's the family that each and every one of us has in each other, and the organizations we each belong to. It's taking a stand to do what we think

is right, and it's the close bonds that we can form in such a short amount of time."

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."

In other area news, an Equality Begins in Forest Grove effort was launched March 22 when members of the Coalition for Human Dignity asked the Forest Grove City Council to notify the public that Forest Grove offers domestic partnership benefits to lesbian and gay employees.

Referring to the *Tanner vs. Oregon Health*



About 300 demonstrators gathered in Salem March 21

PHOTO BY NERISSA EDIZA

Sciences University ruling, coalition spokesman Mitch Gould says, "In December 1998, the Oregon Court of Appeals ruled that government agencies can no longer refuse to offer benefits to domestic partners. For the first time since our state was founded, this means equal pay and benefits for equal work."

He continues: "We were glad to learn that the city has recently notified its employees about this legal decision, and now the city has an opportunity to educate our citizens, too. *Tanner* sends a priceless message not just to government institutions but also to American citizens that democracy really is for everyone."

For that reason, Gould says, the coalition is asking the city to place an advertisement in local newspapers stating that it is in full compliance with the *Tanner* ruling, and to initiate staff training on homophobic harassment.

In a separate but related request, the coalition is asking city officials to issue a proclamation stating that Forest Grove is a hate-free zone.

Some things only get better...



Celebrating our twentieth anniversary

Pictured, left to right: Top row: Daborah Betron, Charis Palmer, Karen Bilsing, Scott Bottaro, Gerry Federico, 2nd row: Jim Bean, Gary Sadleir, Michael McLaughlin, Kirsten Jenkins, Third row: George Marvin, Kathleen Ira, 4th row: Jaye Kraus, Jay Pevney, Kathy Tysinger, Tammie Brown, Carolyn MacMurray, John Terrill, 5th row: Terri Hunt, Lonnie Reents, Chris Hardy, Tracy Thomas, Jeffery Anderson, Holly McCollum, Matt Bahr.



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