

GROUPS

"All lesbians like cats, don't eat meat, listen to the Indigo Girls and have gardens," one girl says matter-of-factly. "All white lesbians anyway."

Sitting quietly on the opposite side of the room, I glance down at the white skin protruding from my sleeves and think, "Hmmm, should I mention that I'm a cat-loving, vegetarian lesbian with tickets to the upcoming Indigo Girls concert?"

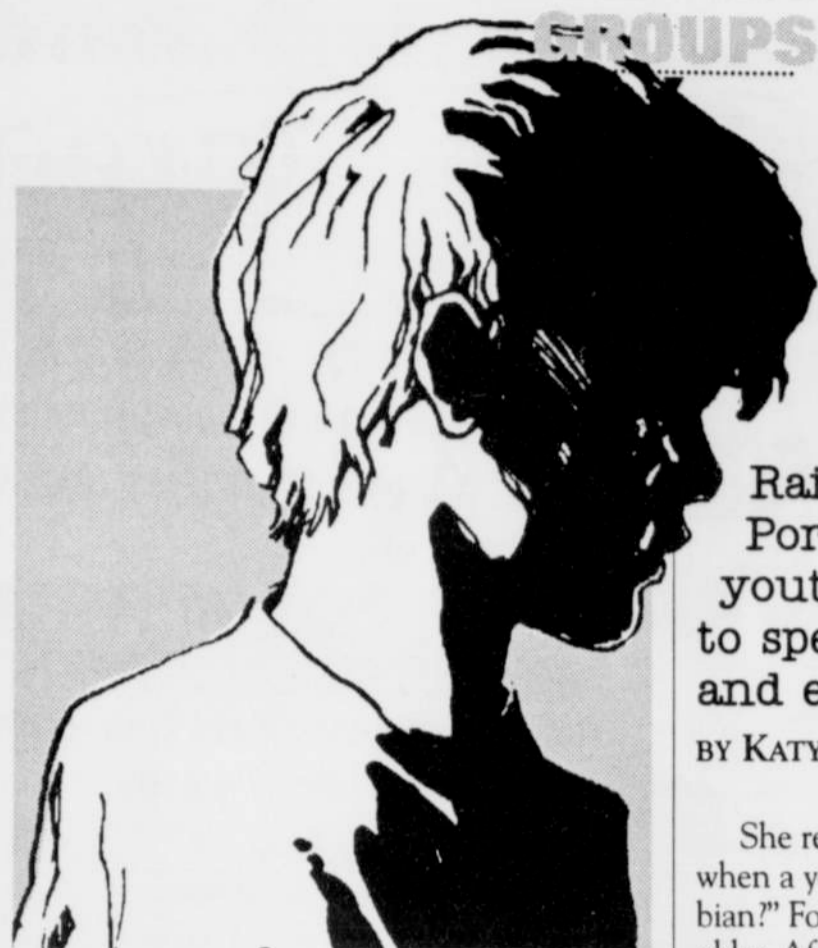
I remain silent. So, maybe some stereotypes ring true. But what of the stereotypes about that girl? As unbelievable as it may sound, some people wonder if African Americans can even be gay. In an innocent discussion, we are each determining how we perceive one another.

This is the kind of discovery that happens at Rainbow every week.

Officially, Rainbow is a multicultural peer support and activity group for gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans and questioning youths. It meets every Monday at the Metropolitan Community Church of Portland and it's moderated by Dionne Fox, a 27-year-old lesbian who adopted the group from the Urban League a few years ago.

Unofficially, it's a way for queer youths of any color to make friends and unload what's on their chests. In the comfortable, secluded environment of the Family Room, we sit in a circle amidst quirky paintings and shelves stuffed with books. The first items on the loose agenda are introductions and check-ins. Fox wants us to say our names, what we did for Halloween and our favorite type of candy.

"I'm 17 and I don't like candy," one boy says, reaching across the table for a bag of Skittles from the snack box. I watch his top lip curl into a smile.



## Don't dis a peer

Rainbow offers Portland-area queer youth a safe place to speak their minds and explore life

BY KATY DAVIDSON

She recalls one of Rainbow's first meetings when a young girl asked her, "Are you a lesbian?" Fox says the girl had never met any older, African American lesbians before.

"We tackle issues of racism in the group—it's different being a queer youth of color than a queer youth," Fox says. "Culturally speaking, the black community is not too accepting. In black culture, it's like you're not really a man if you're a gay man."

Fox says the Rainbow ground rules are that everyone must listen to one another, everyone must respect one another's right to an opinion, and everything must stay in the room.

"It's a support group, but I try to bring in a lot of discussion about life skills, too, like decision making, safe sex, finances, how to listen to people, building self-esteem," Fox says.

I think it's appropriate that Rainbow meets in the Family Room—for some of the group members, Fox plays the role a young, hip surrogate mother.

After this discussion, we somehow ease

"I watched *Blackula*—the movie where Dracula's a black man," another girl says.

The check-ins give the kids a chance to recap their week for everyone, including what is going on in school or home, but also emotionally. One boy says he's sad because after he hooked up with someone at the Sexual Minority Youth Recreation Center, he discovered his new attraction was moving away from Portland. One girl is in the middle of writing a paper about cancer within the African American community. Another boy describes his latest desire to become drag queen of the year at Misfits, and his desire to date Bill Gates or "anyone with a nice car."

After we go around the room, Fox explains to me some of the reasons Rainbow exists.

"When I was growing up, I didn't think black people could be gay," she says.

into the topic of bisexuality. One girl, masking herself in a deadpan expression, unloads a personal discovery: "Sometimes I have straight days and sometimes I have lesbian days," she says. "Today was a lesbian day."

"Why?" asks Fox, with reserved curiosity.

"Because today my friend came over to study and I keep looking at her breasts!" she replies.

As if on cue, a boy enters the room wearing his headphones like a clunky necklace. He grabs a soda, sits down and asks about the topic of the day.

"We're talking about bisexuality," Fox says.

"Oh, I don't believe in *that!*" he exclaims.

There's an exasperated, group-wide laugh and a debate ensues. Even when the members approach a heavy topic, the atmosphere remains friendly and humorous. The kids are here to listen, but they're not afraid to call one other on things when they disagree.

"Just because you don't understand something doesn't mean you can dismiss it," one says.

This is the essence of Rainbow: It's about discovering how people perceive one another, and realizing how similar the differences truly are.

"The group has helped me figure out who I am," one boy says. "I don't know that much about this gay stuff. I'm still looking into it."

This, at least, is one good place to do that.

■ RAINBOW is a multicultural peer support and activity group for gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans and questioning youths. It meets at 4:30 p.m. Monday at Metropolitan Community Church of Portland, 2400 N.E. Broadway. For more information about the group, call (503) 281-8868.



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