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NORTHWEST news

BUTT BUDDIES

Gay Life Health Network gathers men who have sex with men and gives them the lowdown on gettin' down, down there by Inga Sorensen

Move over Bozo—Rimmo's about to hone in on your turf. Well, sort of. Rimmo the Clown, the devoted "ass-istant" to Mr. Cornhole, purveyor of those ever-necessary "secrets to a healthy butthole," is coming to town as part of a kiddie-free circus, where folks will hear "amazing stories of real tops and bottoms," and snag a shot at experiencing "the anal condom and other death-defying acts."

That's right, it's the *Tunnel of Love... Greatest Hole on Earth*, a virtual queer-guy-butt-sex fiesta. But is Portland ready for such a shindig?

We'll know soon enough. An estimated 300 gay and bi men are expected to turn out for the May 4 free event, sponsored by Gay Life Health Network, a group launched last June to "provide entertaining and informative community forums for gay-bi men."

Organizations represented in Gay Life include Brother to Brother, the Oregon Council for Hispanic Advancement and Cascade AIDS Project.

Tunnel of Love is encouraging men to "discuss the meanings and mechanics, the pleasures and pitfalls of anal sex."

According to health advocates, gay and bi men continue to be at high risk for HIV—and unprotected anal sex is the presumed route of transmission in many cases. Additionally, HIV is not the only sexually transmitted disease spread through unprotected anal sex. Hepatitis A and B also pose threats to men who have sex with men.

So what to do about it? Haven't nearly 20 years of prevention messages meant anything? Not enough, say some, who believe dry lectures and watered-down "use a condom" campaigns simply fail to resonate with many queer guys. It's time, they say, to spruce up the ol' message machine—make it zippier and interactive. Heck, make it fun.

"That's what we think *Tunnel of Love* will be—a fun way for men to come together and talk honestly about anal sex," says Gay Life member Alan Rose.

The idea for *Tunnel of Love* spawned from Gay City Health Project, a Seattle-based community organization dedicated to HIV prevention among gay and bisexual men.

Since its founding in 1995, Gay City has sponsored about 20 edgy productions in an effort to promote a sense of community and well-being among gay and bi men.

When Gay City explored its *Tunnel of Love* back in December 1996—nearly four years ahead of Portland—the event was co-hosted by popular drag performer Babalicious. (Portland's version will feature diva Misha Rockefeller as the ring master.)

Gay City's *Tunnel of Love*, held in the heart of the Emerald City's gayest neighborhood, Capitol Hill, caused a bit of a brouhaha even before it occurred. Seems Seattle's Scottish Rite Masonic Center had rented its auditorium to Gay City but later canceled the event, citing objections to frank advertising and promotional materials.

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Gay activists challenged the move, and two days before the Dec. 5, 1996, gathering, Judge Ronald Cox issued a restraining order in King County Superior Court barring the Masonic Order from canceling *Tunnel of Love*.

Immediately after the ruling, Gay City's attorney Jeff Burkhardt said, "From the outset, Gay City was clear with the Masonic Center that the event would draw approximately 400 gay men for explicit education and discussion of safe sex and HIV prevention."

Added Gay City's director, John Leonard: "Within a two-mile radius of this auditorium, nearly 3,000 gay men have died of AIDS, and nearly all of them got infected through unprotected anal sex. The subject may offend some people, but this is a life and death issue in our community."

That sentiment is echoed by gay activists and health advocates in the Portland area who want to connect with men on this issue—even if it means going spicier and more explicit.

