

HOUSE CALL

Gay rights organization heads down south by Jonathan Kipp

Gay kids are committing suicide. That fact is not new. But recent statistics indicate suicide is now the leading cause of death for gay and lesbian youth.

That bombshell and last year's political fight over the Oregon Citizens Alliance's Measure 9 helped Basic Rights Oregon come to the decision about what would be next on its agenda: getting legislation to help these kids.

The organization's leaders and supporters soon will head to the Oregon State Capitol building in Salem in an attempt to do just that. They say they'd prefer to go with as many people as possible.

Lobby Day for House Bill 3247, the Safe Schools Bill, is slated for April 19. The bill recently was assigned to the House Judiciary Committee, chaired by Rep. Max Williams, R-Tigard. Supporters are pushing for a hearing on the bill and a floor vote in both chambers before the session's end.

"Kids are facing extreme levels of harassment in the schools," says Nerissa Ediza, BRO program director. "This is an issue that is important."

According to the most recent Youth Risk Behavior Survey, one in 15 Oregon high school students had been harassed in the previous 30 days because someone thought he or she was gay. These same students were three times more likely to attempt suicide, were more likely to have decreased



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performance and were more likely to drop out than their nonharassed peers, according to the study. The Youth Suicide Task Force's latest prevention plan recommends reducing harassment in schools as a key strategy.

These facts served as the impetus for BRO to spearhead a campaign to get safe schools legislation passed during the 2001 session. Three other states, including Washington, are looking at similar legislation, according to the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.

The House bill addresses the strong link between victimization at school and an elevated risk of suicidal thoughts and behavior. It defines discrimination as "any act that unreasonably differentiates treatment, intended or unintended, or any act that is fair in form but discriminatory in operation." The bill would add sexual orientation and perceived sexual orientation to a list that includes age, disability, national origin, race, marital status, religion and sex.

Ediza says the bill makes sense. If kids in the other classes are protected, "it is really only fair

to be protected from the kind of discrimination they are facing every day in their schools."

The bill would send a message that equal protection is available to all students, Ediza says. Supporters also hope a victory would help keep the OCA's next anti-gay initiative aimed at schools off the ballot.

"This really is just about leveling the playing field for these kids," Ediza

says. Students shouldn't have to be distracted by taunting and concerned for their personal safety while trying to learn, she adds.

But the push for such a mandate is no small order. "We're optimistically hopeful," Ediza says, attributing the struggle to the Leg-

islature's Republican leadership.

That is why it is important for people to show up on Lobby Day, she says. "This is a stretch. I don't want people to think this is going to be easy."

Apparently, numbers do matter. Ediza says legislators consider one face-to-face meeting to be equivalent to meeting with 100 of their constituents. A letter equals 25 voters, a phone call 50. E-mails, Ediza says, have negligible value.

But it is not just a numbers game. "It is especially important on this issue," Ediza says about one-on-one meetings with legislators. "It's important to put a human face on (the issue) to see who cares about it."

Although the thought of lobbying might make some uncomfortable, Ediza says there is no reason to be timid or nervous. Legislators actually welcome face-to-face meetings with constituents. "It's all about just showing up." ■

To register for LOBBY DAY call 503-222-6151 or send e-mail to BasicRO@aol.com.

THE 2001 SESSION

The 2001 legislative session is turning out to be less contentious than the last one. In 1999, Basic Rights Oregon helped defeat nine anti-gay bills, costing the organization \$90,000. Although no anti-gay legislation has surfaced in this session, BRO is tracking a few proposals that "are not favorable to our community," program director Nerissa Ediza says.

One bill seeks to require parental permission for all students participating in the statewide Youth Risk Behavior Survey. If the legislation passes, Ediza says, the study would virtually be rendered statistically invalid.

The survey addresses drugs, alcohol, suicide, harassment and sexual activity but not sexual orientation. Ediza says the bill recently has lost some of its momentum.

In addition to the safe schools legislation, the Legislature is considering the Employment Nondiscrimination Act, continuing a tradition established in the 1970s. A bill that would set up a statewide domestic partnership registry also has been submitted. Neither bill has had any movement so far.

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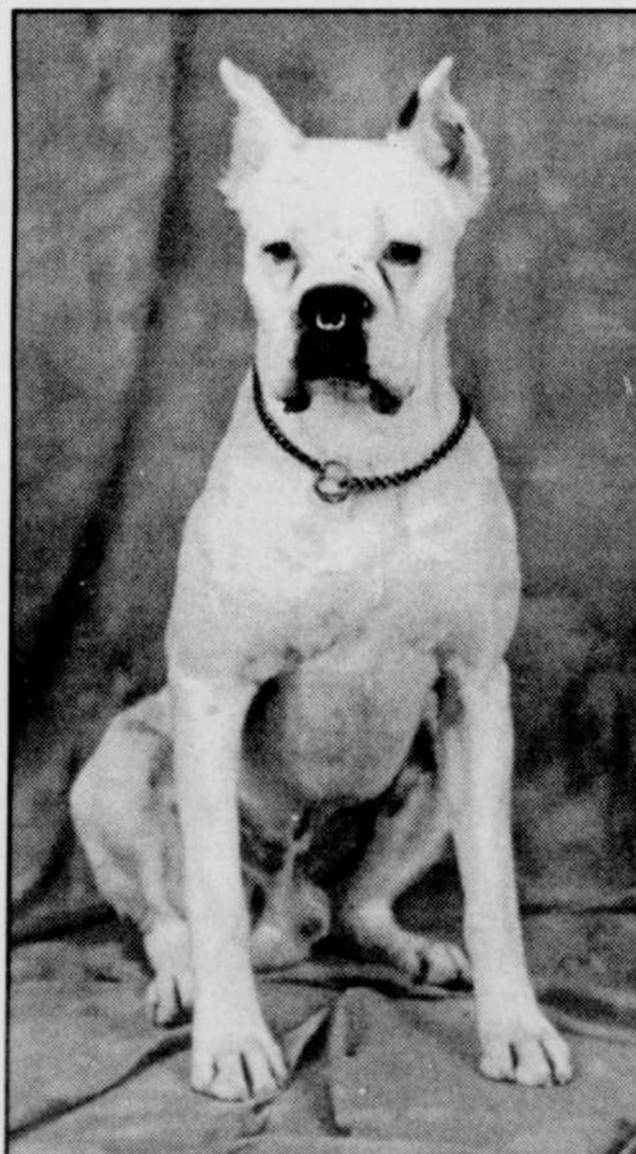
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