

MUSIC

# Young star makes a huge impact

Teen singer and songwriter is already out and about

BY HERON

Lesbians and gay men in Eugene know about her already. She is the proud, courageous young girl who belted out "We're Here and We're Queer" for them at last summer's Lane County Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Pride Celebration.

Coordinator Amber Lunch still is excited about the performance. "Packed with passion and a political sophistication way beyond her years, her lyrics truly touched the crowd," she recalls. "Her voice moves from delicate and almost tearful-sounding to strong and hard-edged. After her short set and standing ovation, she was mobbed backstage by teens wanting autographs and folks wanting to book her elsewhere. Definitely someone to watch."

So who is this singing phenom? Jordan Blumberg-Engel, 13, is all of the things young girls usually are: giddy, giggly, emotional, full of energy. And she's a lesbian.

She remembers feeling different from other kids as far back as the fifth grade. "I wanted to be more macho than being attracted to it," she asserts. "I was always a tomboy, and I was not attracted to guys but to girls."

Those were really scary and confusing times, and she recalls feeling mixed-up inside. "Why was I having these strange feelings around girls?" she asks with remembered pain in her voice.

Then she laughs and answers her own question. "Girls are beautiful!"

Blumberg-Engel was having a lot of trouble with her classmates' taunts and ridicule. "I felt very singled out, for sure," she says. "People started calling me names like 'dyke' and 'butchie.'"

She couldn't understand what was happening to her or to the other girls. Puberty is difficult for everyone, but she knew what she was experiencing was different.

"Other girls were trying to show as much cleavage as they could, but not me."

That she was unlike her peers was obvious to them as well. "Kids made fun of the way I walked. I didn't shake my ass like the other girls," she sums up.

Scared and lonely, Blumberg-Engel went to her mother for advice. "Mom was great," she says.

She was lucky enough to have a mother who gave her all of the loving support she



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could. "Mom had experimented when she was young—you know, with a girl. She explained everything clearly. Mom was totally supportive. I'm really lucky. She said I shouldn't be scared. She assured me that things would get better."

And they did. "I found Youth for Justice," Blumberg-Engel recalls. That was the summer between fifth and sixth grades, and for the first time she met people like herself.

She remembers her first gathering. "I was so surprised just to look at the other members," she gasps at the memory. "I was not the only one! The first time I went, before I even spoke to anyone, I thought, 'Oh boy, just to see them [makes] me so happy!'"

But things also got worse in school. Blumberg-Engel had no friends at all in the sixth grade. That year, kids mocked everything about her—her clothes, her hair, her walk.

"That was really hard," she sighs. "There was no support in school at all. I felt like I was the only one. I felt totally isolated."

She credits the contacts she made at Youth for Justice for helping her survive those hard times. Getting to know and understand other

queer youth and straight kids who accepted them made an enormous difference in her life. She found new friends and started seeing herself as part of a healthy minority.

"Then I felt proud of my G.I. Jane walk, and I started doing better in school. I was a lot happier. Thank God!"

Last month Blumberg-Engel started school at South High in Eugene. She is happier this school year because she knows she's not the only gay or lesbian student there.

"There are others," she notes. "I've already met some of them through Youth for Justice."

Youth for Justice is a recent spinoff group from the Community Alliance of Lane County, a nonprofit organization doing all kinds of anti-bigotry work, fighting discrimination based on race, religion, class and sexual orientation.

Co-coordinator Elly Maloney, an 18-year-old freshman at University of Oregon, describes the organization. "We are a group of young people who dismantle oppressions, fight bigotry and fight social injustice."

Members range from eighth-graders through high schoolers. Maloney points out that Blumberg-Engel now shares a leadership role in the organization.

She also uses her music as a political tool. She writes her own lyrics, often providing a personal-as-political message.

"I started singing a really long time ago, and I've played guitar for six years," she says. "I write my own songs and guitar pieces. I sing about being queer and being a woman."

She adds, sounding more like her age, "I sing about how stuff sometimes turns out being pretty cool."

Blumberg-Engel describes her unique sound. "My style is folk/rock. My guitar is acoustic, so everything turns out sounding like folk," she laughs.

But she has plans for other genres. "When I get an amp, I'll try rock."

She has performed at Saturday Market in Portland as well as the Holiday Market and Cafe Paradiso in Eugene.

At first, Blumberg-Engel has some difficulty thinking of her future after high school. But when encouraged, she shares her dreams. "A career in music would be great. Or politics would be cool."

She plans to go to college but doesn't know which one. "I see myself doing politics in college. Or maybe music and politics."

She enjoyed singing at Lane County Pride, claiming she felt no fear while performing for the crowd of 600. "It was fun!" she recalls.

Her act even attracted the attention of Portland talent scouts. After her performance, Pride Northwest entertainment chair Misha Rockefeller asked her to sing at Pride 2002. So now the Eugene prodigy eagerly is looking forward to playing for a really big crowd.

"We are always looking for exceptional talent to display at Pride, but it's a true treat when we find gems

like Jordan who are so incredibly talented at a young age," Rockefeller says. "We will be fortunate to have her with us at our celebration next year."

And no doubt Jordan Blumberg-Engel will collect hordes of new fans. □

HERON is a Portland free-lance writer and artist.



Wowing the crowd at Eugene Pride

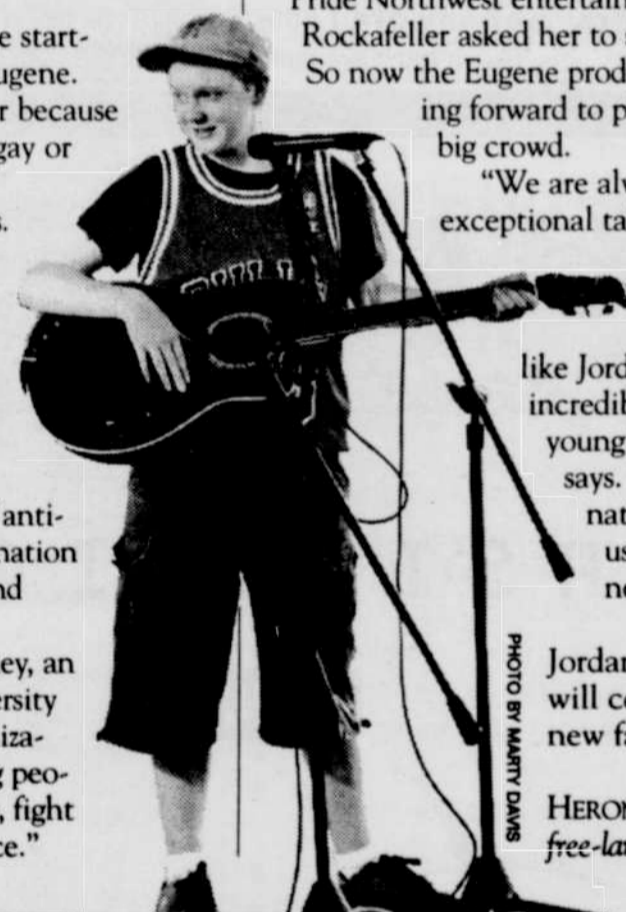


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