

Finding a decent job when you're a teenager is never easy. You can't get hired without experience, and you can't get experience without being hired first. School schedules, extracurricular activities and homework all have to fit in around the job. Sometimes it seems there just aren't enough hours in the day, as a young person tries to juggle an education, work and a social life.

Finding a decent job—and keeping it—is infinitely more arduous for gay, lesbian, bi and trans youth. Although it is illegal in Portland for employers to discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation, it is a common occurrence and leads to people being fired for no reason or not being hired in the first place. Sexual minority youth, who already have the odds stacked against them, are set back yet again by this unspoken bias.

Fortunately, help is available. Worksystems Inc.—a government-funded organization with 18 youth programs and seven adult programs to connect people with their desired jobs in Multnomah, Washington and Tillamook counties—has teamed up with the Sexual Minority Youth Recreation Center to create the Youth Employment Project.

The program truly benefits everyone involved. Employers do not have to spend money to run a “help wanted” ad, then go through the time-consuming process of screening résumés. At no charge, they can contact project developer Nerissa Ediza, and she will search her pool of youth for the right candidate and refer him or her to the employer. Youth benefit because they will secure a job that is not only appropriate to their skill level but that assures them discrimination will not be tolerated at work.

IT'S A TOUGH JOB

Worksystems Inc. and SMYRC team up for Youth Employment Project
by Sarah Leimert



With support from the Portland Area Business Association and Cascade AIDS Project, the program eventually will operate out of SMYRC. It will set up job shadows and train youth to write résumés, conduct interviews and eventually get hired.

In addition, discussions will be held about being out in an often hostile work force. Ediza has contacted a lawyer who is willing to come to SMYRC on a regular basis to educate youth

about their rights in the workplace.

Amanda Imgrund, a 19-year-old who will be involved in the project, has been facing discrimination in the hiring process for months. She has been searching for a job in customer service since July with no luck. Employers seem excited about her experience level on the phone, but after the interview they never call her back.

“I’m very butch in appearance. I guess you could say most people make assumptions about my sexuality because of it.”

—Amanda Imgrund

“I’m very butch in appearance,” Imgrund says. “I guess you could say most people make assumptions about my sexuality because of it. I am sure that if I would have been able to go to SMYRC and acquire a list of gay-friendly establishments...many of my problems would never have happened.”

Ediza says the project will be crucial for teen-agers like Imgrund. “I consider myself to be fairly aware of anti-queer attitudes and issues around the community, but I was still shocked to hear some of the stories that people brought to me about losing their jobs.” One

trans youth she spoke with was fired for using the “wrong” bathroom.

Businesses that already are involved in the project are Rose City Mortgage, Balloons on Broadway and Fastsigns. Waddell & Reed and Griffon Financial Group have committed to working on job shadow opportunities and business panels. Renee Spears of Rose City Mortgage is working closely with Ediza on filling a position at her business.

“We’re happy to be in a position to provide a work environment that allows our employees to be themselves,” she says. “It is important that our youth work in a safe and accepting place without fear of retribution because of their sexual identity.”

Ediza says the biggest challenge she faces in building the partnership is “a lack of understanding from people who are not in the queer community about why being queer would affect employment.” She says a “don’t ask, don’t tell” mentality is not good enough in the work world; she is interested in employers and hiring agencies that realize homosexuality is an integral part of a person’s identity.

“We’re whole people,” she says, “and agencies are not willing to deal with [youth] as whole people.”

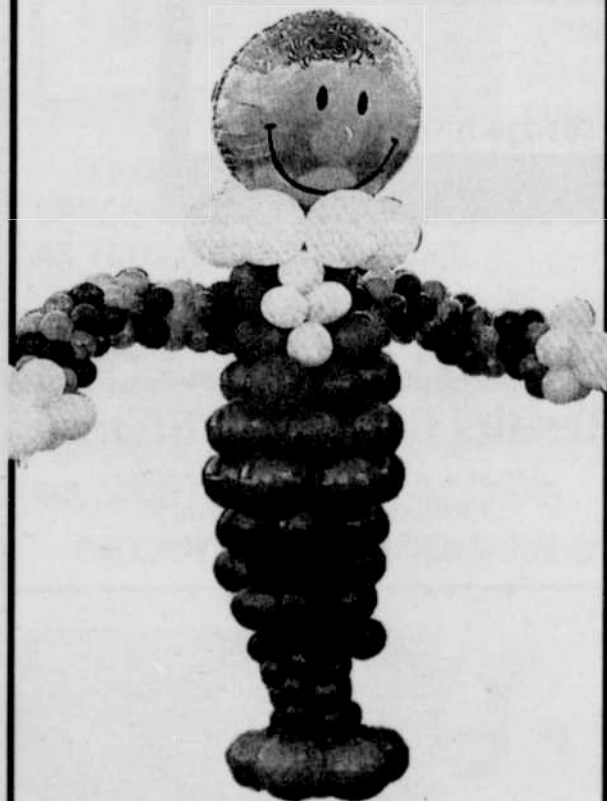
The project is brand new and is awaiting funding but already is showing great promise. Ediza says PABA members are excited about the partnership, and two youth already are awaiting second interviews with Providence. **JM**

To get involved in the YOUTH EMPLOYMENT PROJECT, contact Nerissa Ediza at 503-478-7347 or nediza@worksystems.org.

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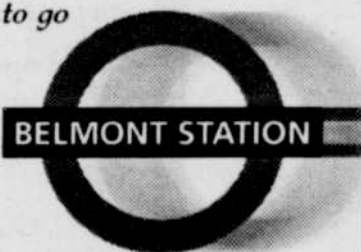
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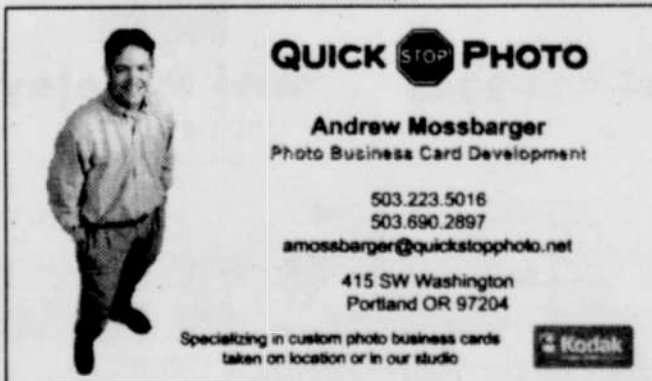


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