

As a teen-ager, Des Anderson probably never thought she would be serving Portland's sexual minorities community in a leadership role.

Today, the 25-year-old activist works as youth and schools organizer for Love Makes a Family. She also coordinates a new Queer Youth of Color support group along with Stephan Herrera of Brother to Brother.

Although she boasts a heritage that includes 11 nationalities, growing up in Des Moines, Iowa, she was "pretty much whitewashed" and remembers her mother stopped making rice dishes in an effort to fit in. Anderson, seeking a way to grab onto the heritage her family was rejecting, turned to art for self-expression.

She says she led a relatively average life into her teens, entering the U.S. Army after high school. She was drawn to the military because it gave her a place to bond and connect with others.

Meanwhile, the family that had seemed so solid was falling apart. Her parents divorced, and her mother "cut all her former ties and started over with [a] new marriage."

In the military, Anderson found companionship and, eventually, a husband. She was married for about two years to a Texan whose goal was a career in police work.

"The Army is very pro-family," she says. "Military programming attempts to break you down while you try to keep part of yourself intact."

Anderson laughs lightly. "He was a great friend," she says, "but I couldn't see myself living life with a Baptist cop in Houston, Texas."

After leaving the Army in 1996, she stayed in Hawaii for a while. She lived there until 1998, when "island fever" struck and she

THE NEXT GENERATION

Young activist turns her life around by Patricia L. MacAodha

headed to Boston because she wanted to "hang out on the East Coast."

With her parents divorced and her grandparents deceased, neither marriage nor the military had fulfilled Anderson's needs. The price for companionship had been her sense of self.

When she came to Portland, things began to change. Here, she found a new identity and a new community waiting for her.

Anderson left behind life as a soldier and a cop's wife to become an outspoken activist. She now works to maintain the Portland Public Schools ban on military recruiters and fights law enforcement abuse as part of the Police Accountability Campaign.

Through Love Makes a Family, she has become a champion for sexual minority youth. She also has discovered new skills to help her in the advocacy work.

Anderson has been effective in her efforts, winning the confidence of the youth she serves. She facilitates groups and meetings, writes for and edits a newsletter, coordinates programs and conducts fund raising—which has proven to be a constant struggle.

Until last summer she was a paid staff member of Rainbow Youth, which was discontinued when it lost the support of its sponsoring agency. She is concerned because "the need for survival is interfering with the work we [Love Makes a Family] are trying to do."

Anderson recently helped launch the Queer

Youth of Color support group and was pleased with the turnout at its first meeting in November. But if funding for her work goes away, she has other plans in mind.

"I haven't gone to college yet," she says. "I hope to do that."

Anderson plans to major in something creative: technical theater, performance, movement and mime around issues such as racism and the needs of youth, music and, of course, art. She would like to develop skills in all of these areas, using them for her community, especially youth.

She worries about people who won't change and who get too comfortable being isolated. "There are all the people we need to reach," she says, "sitting in front of their TVs."

Anderson encourages the sexual minorities community to move toward addressing the issues that exclude people and urges more deliberate awareness. She sees a desperate need for involvement and unity.

She wants the community to get over the petty things that separate them and become more inclusive. She envisions an end to the "numbering and the tokenism" and hopes people will take the steps forward without fear and "be happy we're figuring things out and going to deeper levels."

One thing is certain: Des Anderson will continue to work politically for the community she loves. "I care about this work," she says, and even if the funding doesn't

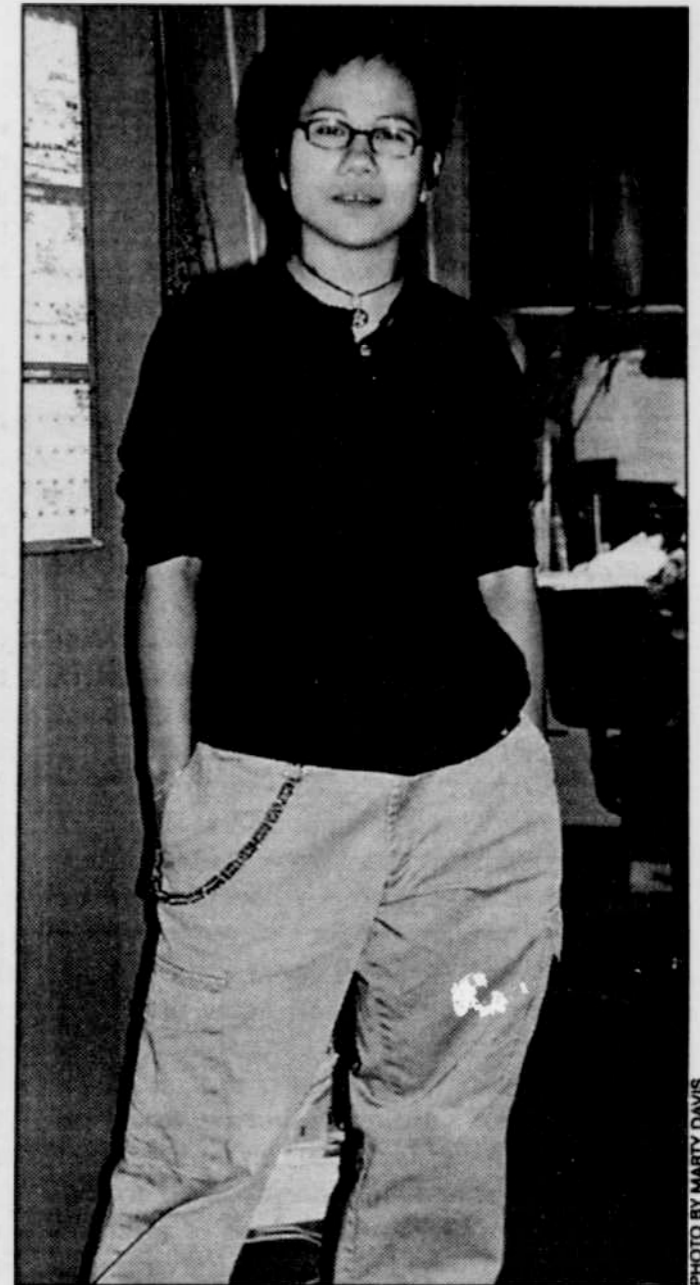


PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS

Des Anderson wants to see the sexual minorities community promote unity and inclusion

appear soon, "I'll stay active and volunteer." □

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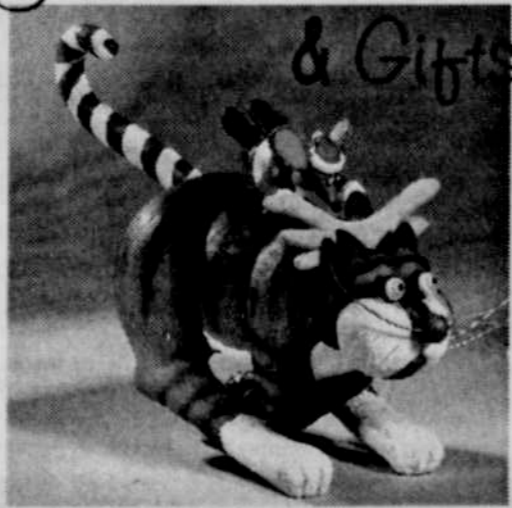


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