

NORTHWEST news

OVER THE RAINBOW

Corvallis health center makes big strides in short time

by Heather Hybarger

It started with a want ad. Christopher Gray says he simply saw the ad, applied and got the job, but it didn't take long to turn his position as a Benton County health promotion specialist into so much more. He is the director of the Rainbow Health Resource Center in Corvallis, which works to promote the well-being of sexual minorities and the general population. The facility opened its doors in August 2001, just two short months after its advisory committee was formed.

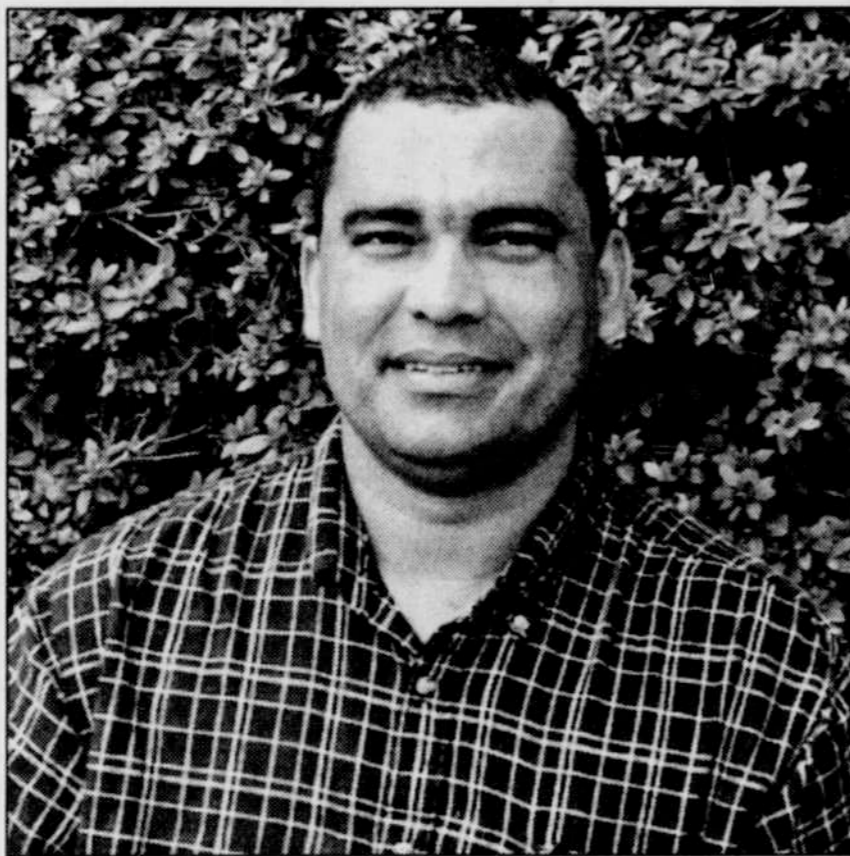


PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS

Christopher Gray helped open the facility just two months after its advisory committee was formed

"We wanted to offer a safe, anonymous environment where people could get any kind of information about anything," says Beth Rink, Community Health Division program manager. "Some people can get intimidated with a more traditional clinical kind of setting. Here, what you see is what you get."

The small office is nestled in a shopping center adjacent to City Hall and a Baptist church. All of the furniture and equipment in the center was donated: desk, computer, refrigerator and two couches.

Gray and the committee quickly came up with a statement of intent and faced the tedious process of educating Benton County about AIDS prevention head-on. They distributed condoms in area bars and coffeehouses. They also began circulating coupons for needle-free HIV testing—a \$24 value—and promoting the anonymous service.

Before they knew it, Dec. 1 was around the corner. It took only a month to plan the county's first-ever community-wide World AIDS Day events, which included a silent art auction, a poetry recital and a concert featuring Confluence, Tone Sharks and Tirade. A total of 204 people came, and \$1,179 was raised.

How did all of this happen so fast? A capable leader and an involved community.

"I am from the Caribbean," Gray says. "I lost two cousins from HIV/AIDS and have far too many friends living with the disease. There are so many good people HIV has taken away. This has given me an opportunity to participate in the community. I felt I could contribute to the development of programs that are community-centered."

Gray is accessible, caring and encouraging of the ideas generated by the advisory committee. Members include representatives from various organizations: Corvallis Gay/Bisexual Men's Group; Out 'n' About; AFTER 8; Rainbow Continuum; Oregon State University Queer Resource Center; Valley AIDS Information Network; Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays; the business community; and Benton County at large.

"Board members go out and share information about the center with their organizations at their meetings," Gray says. "They also bring

back information from those meetings to us. The members...have made a concerted effort in a small community where there are few resources."

This particular group of people have a lot of ideas and have proven to work together cohesively toward a common goal.

"My job is to represent businesses in the community and get a feel for which businesses are supportive," says Patrick Magee, owner of Burst's Candies. "Part of having a business is being invested in the community. It's a good way to help people."

Although the space is small, the center accomplishes a lot. It plays host to one of the area's few support groups for HIV-positive men. In addition to counseling and testing services, the center is expanding to offer

hepatitis A and B vaccinations. It also provides meeting space for a gay Alcoholics Anonymous group.

Gray is the first to admit he faces hurdles in educating a small community about HIV and AIDS. Although the free condoms are getting picked up, safe sex is still a taboo subject of conversation for many, and a lot of misinformation is circulating.

"In bigger cities and towns there is more awareness," Rink says. "We hear a lot about how [HIV/AIDS] 'doesn't happen to people here.' We are starting from the beginning with the whole education process."

The Rainbow Health Resource Center is full steam ahead for 2002. It plans to be an active part of summer events including da Vinci Days, Capitol Pride and National Testing Day.

"We've had to do outreach in baby stages," Rink says. "What is so magnificent is that in a short period of time we have done a lot." □

The RAINBOW HEALTH RESOURCE CENTER is located at 500 Madison Ave. in Corvallis and can be reached at 541-766-6242.

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