

# COSMYC THING

Support group demonstrates commitment to queer youth

by Patricia L. MacAodha

**H**igh school is a time for growth, dreaming, making friends and charting a course for the future.

But what if you are a queer youth living in a notoriously conservative climate? How do you get the support to believe you are a worthwhile person?

Fortunately for queer teen-agers growing up in Clackamas County, there is a place where caring people want to help them take those big steps into the future. Almost three years ago, a group of concerned adults came together to address the problems facing these kids. The result was Clackamas County Sexual Minority Youth Connection, which seeks to make the region "a safer place for queer youth, provide HIV prevention education and to create a safe space for queer youth to express themselves, get support and meet other supportive youth in the area."

Networking is key in the lives of teens. Anything that creates barriers to that process—health issues, lack of contact with one's peers, etc.—can lead to loneliness, isolation and lost opportunities. COSMYC is all about networking, opening doors, providing a shoulder to cry on, inspiring youth to take healthy risks and avoid unhealthy ones.

One participant, Natalie Foglio, has found it to be "a wonderful group which has done wonders for queer kids living in Clackamas." She says that the county "can be an extremely frightening place for a young LGBTQ person" and

that the program "provides a safe place for all youth to be themselves."

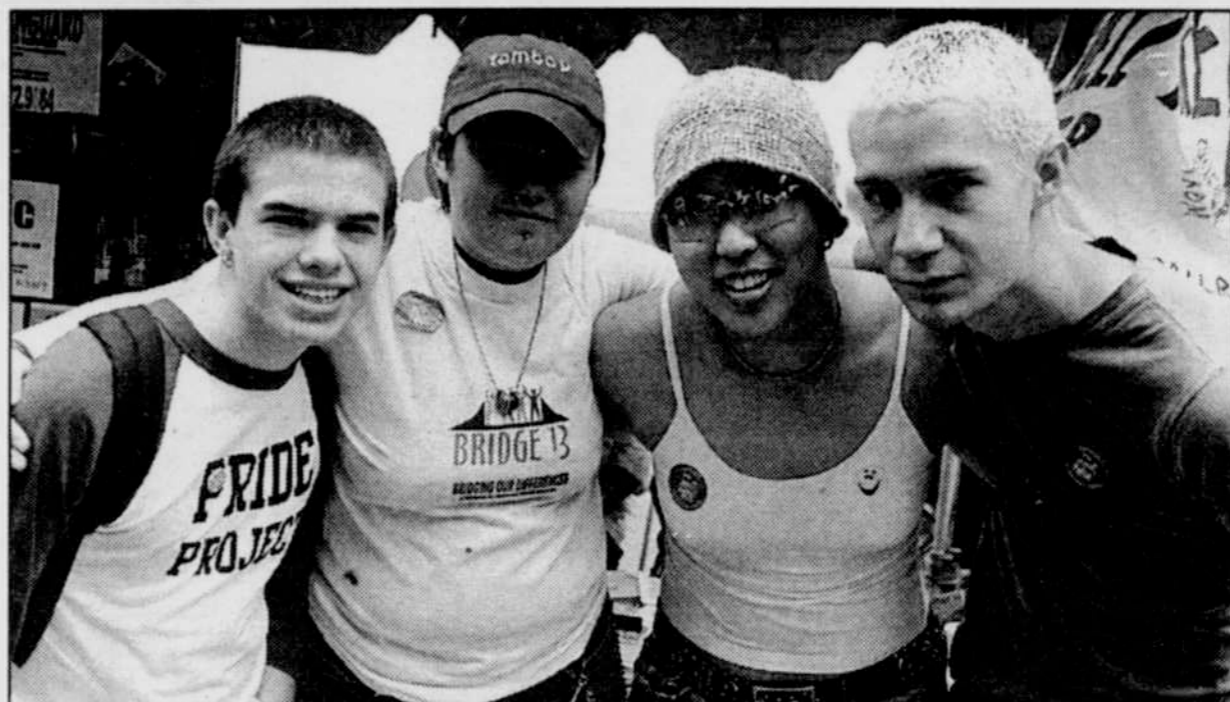
For about a year, the Clackamas County Health Department has funded COSMYC through its HIV prevention plan, later contracting with Vanguard Youth Services—the agency behind the Sexual Minority Youth Recreation Center—to provide staffing and programming.

Six months ago, Doug Hopper was hired to facilitate COSMYC. He had been volunteering at SMYRC at the time while attending college as a journalism major.

Hopper has a personal investment in providing support services to queer kids. While attending high school in the Midwest he joined the Indianapolis Youth Group, which he credits with saving his life when he came out at 15.

"In my four years of involvement I gained so much," he says. "It was so important that IYG existed. Without it, I would be a very different person now. The sense of community and support I received really solidified my devotion to the queer community."

Hopper wants to pass on the kind of help that was given to him in those vulnerable years. This commitment fuels and motivates his work



Doug Hopper (right) celebrates with COSMYC kids during Portland Pride 2002

with COSMYC, which holds weekly meetings at locations throughout the county.

"We work on art projects, talk about whatever happens to be on the minds of the youth, make plans, laugh, play," he says. COSMYC kids also put out a 'zine that contains writing, art, photography and collages and that serves as a resource manual about sexually transmitted diseases, HIV prevention and testing locations.

Hopper is clearly proud of the success the youth have made of the publication, which was sold during Portland Pride 2002 with all proceeds benefiting the program. Now some of the kids are talking about making a movie.

A large part of Hopper's work is focused on HIV prevention and education. "The goal is to create a safe place for GLBTQ youth to be supported and to get real information and resources to take care of themselves," he says. The long-range value of COSMYC, however, reaches far beyond health issues and education to the devel-

opment of the kids in all areas.

Five of the participants will accompany Hopper and another Vanguard staff member to San Francisco this summer for the Young, Loud & Proud conference. The Clackamas County delegation has been diligently fund raising to pay for the trip, with events including a Portland Gay Men's Chorus performance and a barbecue.

Foglio hopes "to gain even more skills to help me later in life, hopefully in the profession of a social worker working with queer youth." The kids also will have opportunities to learn about leadership and communication.

"COSMYC, like any GLBTQ youth group, has so much to teach the world," Hopper says. "Queer youth are full of experiences that make them aware of the world on a level that is very unique. Growing up in Clackamas County as a GLBTQ youth is a struggle, to put it lightly." □

For more information contact CLACKAMAS COUNTY SEXUAL MINORITY YOUTH CONNECTION at 503-969-0060, [cosmycyouth@yahoo.com](mailto:cosmycyouth@yahoo.com) or [www.cosmyc.org](http://www.cosmyc.org). A fund-raiser barbecue will be held from noon to 3 p.m. June 29 at 2100 S.E. Belmont St. The suggested donation is \$5.

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