

Suburb-bound youth often have precious few queer resources available, and what little there is usually only can be found in bigger cities. But thanks to the Washington County Pride Project, this soon might be a thing of the past.

The program's aim is to provide resources for queer and questioning kids 21 and younger. Although its backbone consists of two drop-in support groups, it also sponsors social events and organizes activism.

"Pride Project is a positive place to spend your time, a chance to make a difference, counseling if you need it and a place to make friends," explains Lindsay Sparks, a 20-year-old graduate of Aloha High School. She has been a part of the program for about five months.

Even though several of the county's high schools have gay-straight alliances or similar organizations, mostly run by Pride Project members, the campuses are still by no means safe places. Youth tell stories of physical or verbal violence or more passive homophobia—peers who use "gay" as an insult and tell homophobic jokes and stories.

"I had food thrown at me. I was thrown down the stairs and broke a few ribs," says Christy Miller of Century High School.

Through the Pride Project, the youth have a place to go where they can feel safe, have fun and even precipitate social change. Most of the kids involved are high schoolers between 15 and 18, although a few have been as young as 12. Close to 50 youth are involved with various aspects of the Pride Project on a regular basis, but about 150 more rotate through some part of the program less frequently.

"People come and go. Usually there's a core group of six to 14 youth," explains Molly Franks, the Pride Project's sole full-time employee.

## NEW POWER GENERATION

Washington County Pride Project provides support, safety and a fun social atmosphere for queer youth by Emma Rood



Molly Franks (center) leads queer youth through downtown during Portland Pride 2002

These "core" people are primarily the kids who come to the two support groups that form the heart of the program. The weekly meetings in Beaverton and Hillsboro take on a wide variety of roles, from safe spaces and activist coalitions to social scenes and informal dating services.

"I was kinda freaked out about who I was, and it was a really positive environment," says 17-year-old Sunset High School student Amanda Wagner, explaining her reasons for becoming involved in the Pride Project. She adds, "And

Molly is a really positive role model."

Franks works with 16 high schools and does "outreach all over the county. I go to schools, community spaces [and] do one-on-one support and advocacy."

A Washington County native, Franks facilitates the two support groups and helps youth organize events and activities such as hikes, movie nights and bowling. "We try to make a change in the community," Wagner says.

The biggest project during the past few

months has been working with Tualatin Valley Television to create shows on topics pertaining to sexual minority youth. So far the kids have put on two panel discussions and have plans in the works to present a game show-style educational program about HIV.

Many of the Pride Project participants work with Bridge 13, an activist group that educates people, primarily educators, about sexual minority youth through community outreach. "It's a very popular program," Franks comments.

And there's always more to be done. The only limitations on the Pride Project's expansion are resources, namely a lack of time and money.

"If there were five of me, I'd love to do more focus organizing with specific schools. As it is, I do that, but on a really limited basis," says Franks, who would love to see Washington County open a facility similar to the Sexual Minority Youth Recreation Center in Southeast Portland.

Still, the Pride Project keeps growing. Members always are coming up with new plans, and the television programming is a "bottomless pit of fun," as Franks puts it.

"There are youth everywhere with all kinds of ideas and enthusiasm," she says. "Way more great stuff can happen." □

The WASHINGTON COUNTY PRIDE PROJECT meets 4 p.m. Wednesdays and Thursdays. For details call Molly Franks at 503-260-5792. Anyone interested in volunteering should call Tina Barfoot at 503-872-9664, ext. 27.

EMMA ROOD is a 16-year-old high school escapee who just fulfilled her life's dream of becoming a Lesbian Avenger. She attends Simon's Rock College in Massachusetts and can be reached at erood01@simons-rock.edu.

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