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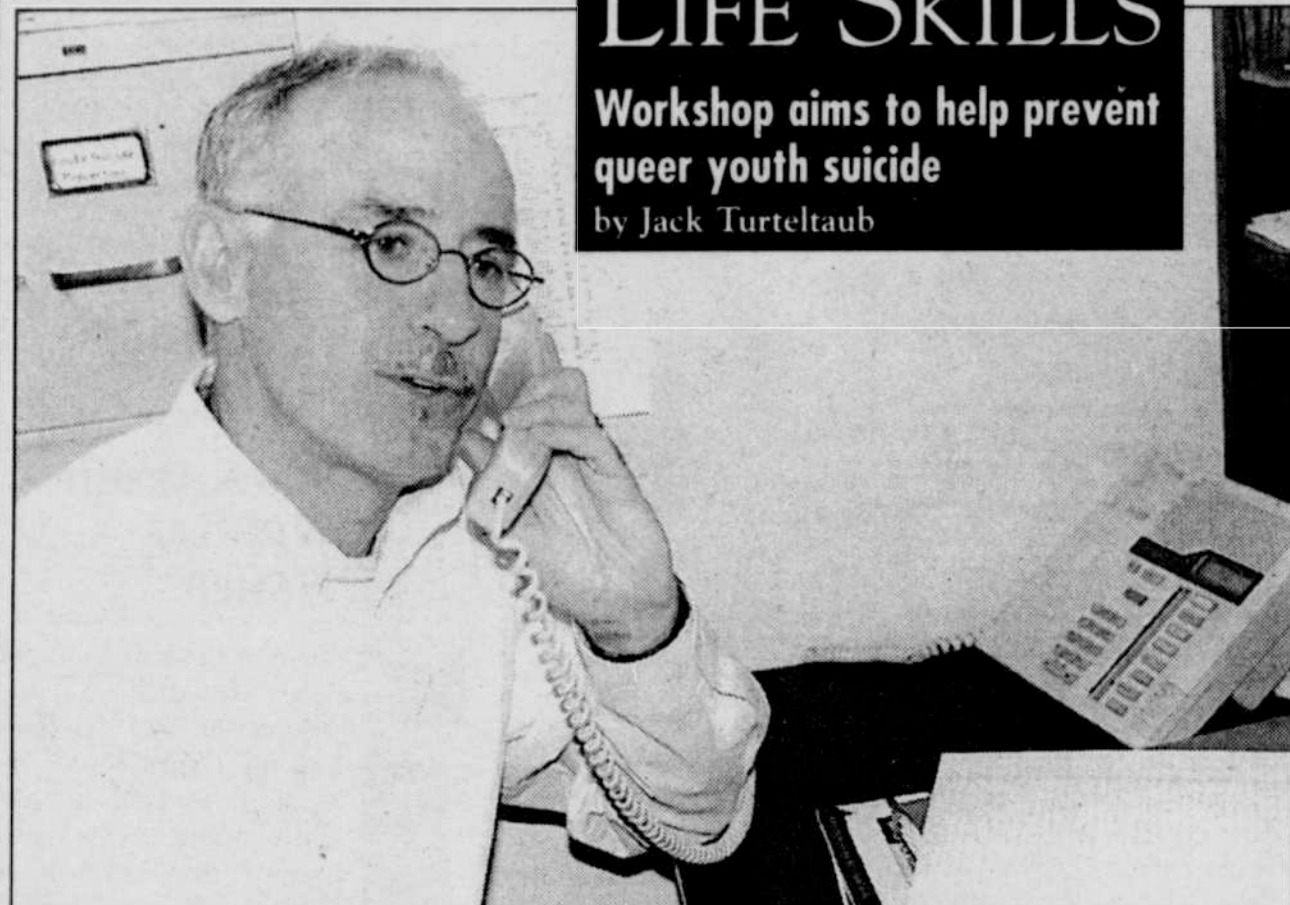
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NORTHWEST news

LIFE SKILLS

Workshop aims to help prevent
queer youth suicide

by Jack Turteltaub



Ron Bloodworth calls queer youth suicide "the secret within a secret"

A mother knows best. But when Linda Skibinski's 19-year-old son, Matt, who she now believes was gay, hung himself in 1991, this professional counselor at the Dougy Center didn't know anything about depression or suicide. Had she known, she believes, he might have lived.

This month, for the first time in Oregon, a two-day interactive workshop will show professionals and concerned individuals, including educators and parents, how to prevent queer kids from killing themselves. Ron Bloodworth, a gay man and the state's youth suicide prevention coordinator, and Lisa Westlund, a lesbian who works at the Marion County Psychiatric Crisis Center, will lead the session.

The workshop uses a model called Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training, which focuses on suicide "first aid" to help people facilitate intervention. Bloodworth says ASIST is based on a "gatekeeper strategy," showing those who are in a position to recognize at-risk youth how to be sensitive and assist them in getting the help they need to save their lives.

Westlund recognizes that the workshop "really addresses a need. I hope we see a large number of participants."

A former teacher and school counselor, Bloodworth got involved in the issue when he served on the youth suicide task force created by Oregon Gov. John Kitzhaber in 1996. "I wanted to make sure that sexual minority youth issues were going to be addressed—I knew it was a high-risk group," he says.

Bloodworth cites research showing the dramatic scope of the problem. He says queer kids have a "two to seven times greater risk for attempting suicide" compared to their straight peers.

Bloodworth calls sexual minority youth suicide "the secret within a secret." Because suicide carries a certain stigma in U.S. society, he explains, people don't like to acknowledge or even talk about it. Add to that the kids' fear of rejection by peers and families—even by their role models who have uncritical, "heterosexual assumptions"—and the crisis multiplies.

Studies indicate 40 percent of U.S. teens are prejudiced toward sexual minorities, according to Bloodworth. Skibinski emphasizes that harassment is almost always a factor in youth suicide and that this problem is simply magnified with queer kids.

Questioning youth are also of great concern

these days. "I don't think sexual identity is solid; I see it as fluid," Westlund says. "We need to learn not only about youth who come out as gay and lesbian but those youths who really don't know, who may be struggling with their identity." She adds that "even as adults we struggle to identify ourselves correctly."

Westlund says bi youth also are ostracized—not accepted for trying to work out their dual identification. And she sees an increasing number of kids identifying as trans. "A lot more schools are having to work through gender issues, trying to accept those youth who identify outside the traditional male or female gender." Westlund feels the ASIST workshop is as much "about accepting others as it is about suicide."

Looking back from her perspective today, Skibinski says her son displayed many of the warning signs for suicide. "And there are always multiple factors," she adds.

Skibinski notes that in her son's case, there was "alcoholism on both sides of the family." Matt was "a classic 'anxious' child," and he showed obvious symptoms of depression. Skibinski notes that in his last year he "displayed more behaviors that I recognize today as the real warning flags: increased use of alcohol/marijuana in an effort to self-medicate, decreasing rationality, a preoccupation with death and anhedonia," a clinical term that describes a loss of the normal ability to take pleasure in life and the activities one otherwise would enjoy.

Matt's death drove Skibinski to return to school to obtain a master's degree and to write a thesis on youth suicide factors. It also motivated her to become active in the Northwest chapter of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention.

Skibinski says that her son never told her—or anyone she knows—that he was gay but that he "left poetry and short stories that leave little doubt in our minds. The only times I ever saw him look radiantly happy was around his best male friend." □

The APPLIED SUICIDE INTERVENTION SKILLS TRAINING workshop will be held from 8:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Oct. 23 and 24 at Westminster Presbyterian Church, 1624 N.E. Hancock St. The cost is \$40 a person. To register call 503-731-4978 or e-mail ronald.bloodworth@state.or.us by Oct. 18.

JACK TURTELTAUB is a personal coach, clinical psychologist and free-lance writer who may be reached at turteltaub@e-z.net.



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