

FIXING A HOLE

YWCA counseling center attempts to fill gap by Kathy Belge



From left, Adrienne Wolmark, Catherine Pivetti and Julie Perry provide a safe, supportive and sympathetic place for queer-specific therapy

A 14-year-old boy struggles with his sexual identity. A middle-aged trans woman is seeking a referral letter for hormones. A lesbian couple fight about sexual differences. A 75-year-old gay man's partner just died. A member of the leather community contemplates suicide. Where can these people turn for help?

With the demise of Phoenix Rising and Cascadia Behavioral HealthCare's Helios Program, fewer counseling options exist for the sexual minorities community. The YWCA of Greater Portland fills this much-needed gap.

The counseling center's sliding-scale fees make therapy affordable for low-income people. "Services are not just for young folks, not just for women and certainly not just for Christians," director Adrienne Wolmark points out.

Without many marketing dollars, word is getting out that the Y is a safe place for gay, lesbian, bi and trans people. According to Wolmark, 75 percent of her clients identify as queer. Many graduate students are choosing to be placed at the Y because of its emphasis on sexual and gender minorities and because of Wolmark's reputation as a gender expert and gifted mentor.

So how does the YWCA do this when so many other agencies are buckling under the crunch of budget cuts? It receives grants from foundations, including Equity. Much of the YWCA's fund-raising efforts go toward the counseling center, and all of the therapists are volunteers or graduate students from Portland State, Pacific University, Lewis & Clark and Pacifica Graduate Institute.

Catherine Pivetti is one such intern. She is quick to point out that, unlike other strapped-for-cash agencies, the YWCA has no predetermined time limit for services and will not push clients into group therapy unless they want it.

Yet, as facilitator of the sexual minority women's support group, Pivetti says groups are most beneficial for some people. "When you hear of another person being rejected by family or their job, it's much easier to come up with the appropriate anger and to acknowledge that this person didn't deserve to have that happen. The more they can do this, the more it has an effect on themselves, too."

Mark Ferguson proudly claims the title of the first male volunteer therapist at the YWCA. With an undergraduate degree in theology, he attempts to help clients reconcile sexuality and religion.

"The queer community tends to suffer a lot from institutional religions," he says. "There's a lot of pain there, there's a lot of anger there, there's a lot of feeling lost. But I believe that in human beings there is a spiritual quality.... I tend to define it as our connection with the rest

of life. So I often find myself weaving that into my practice."

Why queer-specific therapy? Wolmark says, "I think it's important to have queer-specific counseling because there are specific issues that queer folk deal with and it's important that you have counselors that are knowledgeable about and sensitive to those issues."

Pivetti interjects, "For example, a client who has suffered through reparative therapy needs a place to go where they can feel very safe."

Wolmark adds: "I think a lot of times with reparative therapy what you're dealing with is someone who started out with a significant amount of guilt and shame.... And then what happens is the treatment intensifies the guilt and shame. It makes it worse." YWCA therapists are trained to help clients work through this.

For trans clients, Pivetti states, it is important that therapists see beyond their gender identity and treat them as a whole person. They might need help for depression that has nothing to do with their gender.

"On the other hand, there are some folks for whom gender is the issue, and for them we have counselors who are sensitive to gender issues, transgender issues in particular," Wolmark adds. "We have some capacity right now to do hormone and surgery letters."

For the past two years the YWCA has offered free counseling to sexual minority youth. Wolmark says for kids especially, counseling can be the difference between life and death. "As an adult you potentially have more resources, more ways to find out information. You're also not struggling with adolescence, which in and of itself is tumultuous.... I think for the youth it's even more important that they have a place to go that's safe and supportive with a sympathetic ear."

The YWCA also recognizes the strength of the queer youth community, bringing facilitators in each year to train the therapists.

Wolmark is quick to point out that for many sexual orientation is not an issue, but still queer clients want to receive counseling from a therapist they are comfortable with and who understands the community.

Another group the YWCA staff want to make sure feels welcome is the S/M community. Clients who ask to see a "Blue Dove" therapist will be linked with a kink-friendly counselor. ☐

The YWCA OF GREATER PORTLAND, 1111 S.W. 10th Ave., offers individual, group and couples counseling as well as a support group for lesbians and plans to start a trans support group. For an appointment call 503-294-7440.

KATHY BELGE is a Portland free-lance writer.

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