

Growing up hasn't been easy for Nicki Baker-Cook.

"My life has been very...eventful," says the 18-year-old of her personal struggle with homelessness, teen pregnancy and domestic violence. "I'm always waiting for the other shoe to drop."

Things may have been difficult, but she has never given up. In fact, Baker-Cook has spent hundreds of hours volunteering her time to the organizations that supported her through hard times.

"When you're living on the streets, people are taking care of you," she says, referring to the food, shelter, medical care and other resources she accessed. "I was advocating for myself as much as I was for anyone else. I was only giving back to the people who've given to me."

For the past nine years Baker-Cook has volunteered at numerous organizations, including the Sexual Minority Youth Recreation Center, tirelessly advocating for kids like her. She organizes sports and crafts programs for Portland Parks and Recreation and maintains grounds for at-risk youth in Southeast Portland. She has tutored students at Foothills Academy, helped athletes train for the Special Olympics, pitched in to create Outside In's Pride parade float and spoken out about the effects of budget cuts on homeless youth.

Looking at her achievements, it's easy to believe Baker-Cook can do anything she sets her mind to. But things haven't always been easy for the teen.

When she was just 15, Baker-Cook left home to escape domestic violence. Her mother "didn't protect me because she didn't want to admit it was happening," she says. "She sent me to live with my grandmother. I was really angry. I needed her to protect me."

Their relationship became even more distant when her mom learned Baker-Cook was bisexual. "My mom found out when she heard me talking about an ex-girlfriend," she explains. "It was hard. I wasn't allowed to talk about it in front of my brother and sister. My mom was afraid I might make them gay."

After two years of moving around and living with several different family members, Baker-Cook decided she'd try to make it on her own, and for two years she was homeless. Sleeping in shelters and getting by on food stamps didn't stop her from giving back to her community. Despite her hardships, she continued to volunteer.

But she doesn't consider her contributions extraordinary. "I am helping friends," she says. "I know how to navigate the services, and I have the skills to get things done."

Her positive attitude and commitment to the community earned Baker-Cook recognition by the Multnomah Youth Commission, a group providing a voice for young people in county decisions that affect them

and working to combat stereotypes that label kids as lazy or problematic. She was honored April 30 with the first-ever Jennifer Beegle Youth Involvement Award, which recognizes youth who create positive changes through volunteerism. It is named after a former commission member who died in a 1996 car accident at the age of 17.

Michelle Burke, an employment specialist at Outside In, nominated Baker-Cook for the award. "She has a vibrant energy to her that really makes her stand out," Burke says. "People respond to her confidence and leadership ability."

Burke says that until she sat down with Baker-Cook to talk about her volunteer experience, she didn't realize the extent and longevity of her efforts. "She has done so much; it's amazing," says Burke, who was at the ceremony the night Baker-Cook accepted the award. "She took it all in stride."

Baker-Cook says she was surprised to learn she'd won the prestigious award. "I didn't think I'd done anything that special. I had no idea what a big deal it was until I got to the ceremony. My name was on the cake!" she adds.

After the ceremony a commissioner asked Baker-Cook to join the county's board of volunteers. "I was shocked," she says. "But I'm very interested."

Perhaps her most significant accomplishments have been with at-risk youth who, like Baker-Cook, have had to overcome significant obstacles. "It's a lot easier to understand people who have been in your situation," she says. "Especially when they're your age."

While volunteering for SMYRC, Baker-Cook started a domestic violence support group for queer youth. Having been a victim of abuse herself, she understands that services for sexual minority youth are lacking.

POSITIVELY INSPIRING

Portland teen wins award for volunteerism

by Jodi Helmer

"Anyone can be abusive," says Baker-Cook, who believes the perception that domestic violence is always male-on-female has created a gap in services. "There aren't a lot of groups out there for queer youth. I was helping to provide much-needed support."

During the week Baker-Cook can be found volunteering in the Employment Resource Center at Outside In, where she helps kids work on their résumés. "I advocate for a lot of youth," she says. "I know that I can't make a difference in everyone's life, but if one or two people have a better life because of me, then I've done my job."

Baker-Cook says many youth look to her as an example. "I've made a deep impact on some people," she says. "I've given them hope. They look at me and think, 'If she can do it, so can I.'"

Almost four years after she first left home, Baker-Cook is busy settling into her new life. After a high-risk pregnancy, she gave birth April 16 to a healthy boy named Nicholas. "He's my little pumpkin angel," she says, smiling at her newborn son. On May 16 she married Nicholas' father, Brian Cook, in the courtyard at Outside In, where they met exactly a year ago.

After taking a "Ready to Rent" class through Outside In, the couple secured funding from Teen Insights and moved into transitional housing in Gresham three months ago. For the first time in years they have a home of their own.

"We have house keys," she says, laughing. "It's weird."

Even her relationship with her family is

improving. "My mom and I are working through all of the things that have happened to us," she says. "We're starting to have a relationship."

Though her family is still uncomfortable with her bisexuality, Baker-Cook says they seem to be coming around. "They think it's weird. But my sister stuck up for me at school and my brother scopes chicks with me, so I think it's going to be OK."

Life still isn't easy. In addition to taking parenting classes, participating in counseling sessions, working to maintain stable housing and making plans to attend Apollo College this summer, Baker-Cook continues to find time for volunteering.

"Chaotic is the best environment for me," she jokes. "I'm either busy or I'm bored." □

JODI HELMER is a free-lance writer and editor. She has never been nominated for an award, but you can make her feel like a winner by visiting www.jodihelmer.com.



Nicki Baker-Cook awaits presentation of the first-ever Jennifer Beegle Youth Involvement Award on April 30 at the Multnomah County Commission Boardroom

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—Nicki Baker-Cook

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