

# Art and P:EAR-ity

Queer-friendly homeless youth program sparks creativity and hope

by J.B. Rabin



"Circle with Eight Legs" by Andi Bang, p:ear youth

**T**he first time I visit the open workspace and offices of p:ear it is a Monday. P:ear is ostensibly closed on Mondays for administrative work. So when I show up, I assume I have the staff to myself, and plenty of uninterrupted time to interview the women responsible for making p:ear what it is.

Within two minutes of sitting down with Pippa Arend, 31, and Beth Burns, 32, two of p:ear's directors, the door opens. In walks a woman from another nonprofit asking to borrow something. Then a nearby business owner pays a visit to see how things are going.

Not five minutes later, two of the kids who p:ear serves drop in to see if they made any money at the previous night's art show. One girl had created a collection of magic wands—one has a tag that reads "for clearing negative energy"—out of branches, wire, beads and stones. It turns out that two sold, underpriced at \$11 each, for which Burns hands her \$20. The remaining \$2 goes back into the p:ear general funds pot. The two kids stick around a little while longer to chat with Burns and Arend and then go on their way.

It dawns on me that p:ear, which serves homeless and transitional youth in downtown Portland, is never really closed. And the three directors have the schedules to prove it. Despite the 15 weekly volunteers at p:ear, Arend, Burns and Joy Cartier work 10 hours a day, six days a week—which they say is an improvement over the 12-hour days, seven days a week they were working until recently.

"Our goal was to see 12 kids a day. We average now about 35," says Burns, who has a background in social services and acts like the cool older sister many youth wish they had.

Their 2-year-old program is rooted in a strong belief that a change in behavior does not come without a change in attitude. P:ear aims to transform homeless youth into happy members of society, not just productive ones.

## The Seeds of Change

**P**:ear—short for Program: Education, Arts, Recreation—is the brainchild of Burns, Arend and Cartier, who met while teaching a GED course for homeless youth. Seeing that the kids' full potential was not being accessed, the three women began incorporating art into break times and watched as it tapped into a different part of the students' brains.

"Some children don't relate to [traditional math], but when they have to, they can calculate the measurements of a frame for one of

their paintings within a quarter of an inch," says Cartier. The 50-year-old spent more than seven years with homeless and transitional youth at the Salvation Army Greenhouse before co-founding p:ear. She's as likely to call a kid "dear heart" as she is to address him by a street name.

The GED program was shut down in August 2001, leaving the three women without work. They conspired to create a nonprofit that would fill the gap in services for homeless youth in Portland. While other programs focus on providing physical necessities such as food, shelter, medical care and job training, the women of p:ear wanted to do something that would address the emotional, intellectual and creative needs of the kids as well.

"One day a kid comes in and wants to paint. The next day she's capable of doing algebra. The day after that she wants to take a walk or go cross-country skiing. We wanted to create an environment where all those needs could be met," says Arend, who ran her own welding business before becoming involved in educating homeless youth.

In trying to identify a common thread among the youth they have worked with, the women realized it was something less tangible than the need for food or shelter.

"Almost all the kids are experiencing a lack of self-worth," says Cartier. "Only when that is restored is one able to move forward."

The reasons for homelessness are as