

diverse as homeless youth themselves. One of the kids at p:ear hit the streets because his mom started selling drugs. Another young woman was outright abandoned. "She came home from school one day and mom's gone, all the clothes are gone, everything's gone," says Cartier.

There is also the all-too-familiar story of the exemplary kid—pulling straight A's in school, on the chess team—who is kicked out of the house after telling his parents he is gay.

It is not uncommon for children to become homeless because of their sexual orientation. The National Network of Runaway and Youth Services has estimated that 20 percent to 40 percent of youths who become homeless each year are gay, lesbian or bi. Outside In, another Portland social service agency serving homeless youth, estimates that 30 percent of homeless youth are gay, lesbian, bi, trans or questioning.

The denizens of p:ear seem to view sexuality as something fluid. Later in the week, when I ask some of the p:ear youth how many of them identify as queer, they scoff at me as if I had just asked how many of them drive BMWs.

"I see [sexual orientation] like socks," says Tuesday, a preternaturally beautiful girl in a long, pink dress. "Sometimes you pick one with stripes, sometimes you pick one without..."

Odesa, who is now 21 and has known Arend, Burns and Cartier since she was 15, mulls the question before saying: "I've identified as homosexual. I've identified as transsexual. I don't know..." She leans over and asks the cute boy with the facial tattoos sitting next to her, "What am I?"

"You're Odesa," he replies.

"Yes, I'm Odesa. The legend continues." When I recount the episode to Burns, whose partner is a woman, she smiles knowingly and says the statistics on sexual identity aren't necessarily reflective of what they see at p:ear.

"It's more like, 'I was this yesterday, I am this today, and I will be this tomorrow,'" says Burns. She notes that teen-agers in general seek out experimentation, and also that the homeless youth community tends to be accepting of different sexual orientations.

"What p:ear is all about is trying to get these kids out of a box," says Burns. "You are not just homeless. You are not just queer."

P:ear's mission is to create something that will help these kids alter their self-perception.



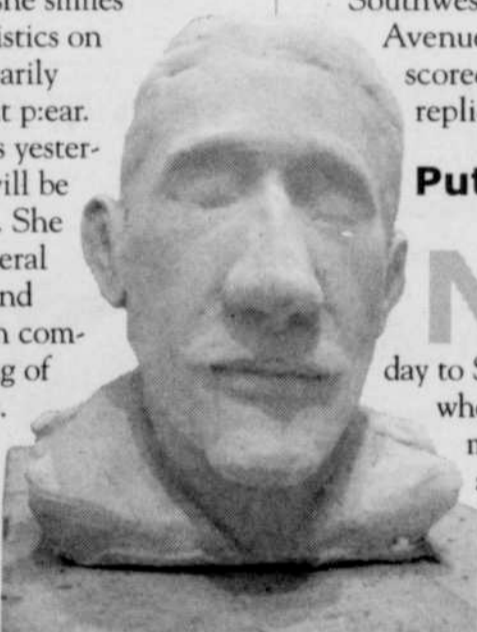
p:ear founders Pippa Arend, Beth Burns and Joy Cartier hang with the art in their gallery

"Unless something fundamental changes about the way someone feels about themselves, you can give them housing, treatment, jobs...but it's a revolving door," says Cartier.

Though there was no model to base their plan on, it took the would-be p:ear directors only six months for their idea to become a reality. They pooled their savings and added that money to \$2,000 they made at a fundraiser for their project. P:ear came to fruition in February 2002 at an enviable location on Southwest Alder Street and Park Avenue. (When asked how they scored such a coveted spot, Arend replies, "We called.")

Putting Down Roots

Now p:ear's doors are open to homeless youth from 8:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. Wednesday to Saturday. During that time, kids who are enrolled in the program may come and go as they please and partake of as much education, art and recreation as they wish. They come to eat; paint; work on the computer; go on field trips to Portland Center Stage, the museum or the beach; study for their GEDs; learn from a visiting artist; or just take refuge.



Visiting artist Benjamin Alexander Clark made this sculpture called "Daniel" as part of his inspired by p:ear exhibition

While many service programs cut kids off after their 21st birthday (causing most homeless youth to dread becoming an adult), p:ear is the only program that serves kids ages 15 to 23, with the stipulation that in order to continue until age 23, they have to enroll before their 21st birthday.

"Other organizations are cool if you're just looking for a superficial ride until you're 21," Odesa opines. "When you really need something legitimate, they aren't there for you. 'If you step outside our mold or have any problems we can't duct tape, you have to leave.'"

"And wash your hands," says Adrian, who started living in the streets a year ago after he was laid off from his high-tech job in Chicago.

Homeless youth say they aren't just looking for the most obvious help. A free bed and some clothes are much appreciated, but youth often place a higher premium on their freedom of expression and identity, as well as their autonomy.

For Tuesday, other programs' attempts to empathize with racial and queer issues sometimes feel stilted. "Here it's not an issue. They don't have to try," she says.

Arend echoes this sentiment by saying: "This is a relationship-based program. We're not faking it. We're not pretending to like these kids."

Many of the kids cite the feeling of unconditional acceptance as the reason they love p:ear. "A lot of us have done some really

shitty stuff to them," says Odesa. (Just that morning Burns' camera had gone missing.) "But they've always accepted us back into their lives."

"P:ear is one of the reasons I've stayed in Portland," says Tuesday, who feels supported in her recent endeavor to re-enter drug treatment. "It's nice to walk into a place that services homeless youth and they notice if you're sad."

Branching Out

The next time I descend on p:ear it is a Friday. The doors are very much open and I walk in to find the place teeming with people. Getting someone to sit down and talk with me is like trying to put a jacket on a hummingbird. I manage to chat with Suzy Kitman, a Portland artist who volunteers every week as a mentor. She is sitting at a long table, slyly working on an oil portrait of some of the youth.

"You have to be very flexible here," Kitman says, advising me as much as reflecting on her experience. "It's a very organic process."

Professional artists like Kitman say they get involved with p:ear to give back to their community and to provide homeless kids with positive, creative role models.

"You could conceivably be the most reasonable adult presence in their lives," says Kitman, who notes that making personal connections with some of the kids is a highlight. "It happens slowly, but it's a beautiful thing when it does."

As if on cue, several youth convene around our table and begin chatting and working on art projects of their own. Arend, Burns and Cartier often refer to the young people as "kids," yet the moniker doesn't quite fit. If life experience counted toward being considered adults, these kids would be thought old beyond their years. Yet there is something childlike about them that inspires the fierce devotion of the p:ear staff display.

One way in which homeless youth have found to take care of themselves is to adopt fake names. (Many of the names used here are not the youths' given names.) Arend explains that these names are a part of street culture and are a way to create a new identity. For some kids who have warrants out for their arrest, it is a matter of physical protection from the law. For others it offers emotional protection.

"Let's say a kid's name is Mike," Arend says. "He turns 15, starts doing drugs, becomes a prostitute...he starts calling himself Shirley Temple because he wants to protect Mike, because Mike is good."

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