

Continued from Page 23

In the meantime, the coalition is focusing on education, data collection and support services for queer youth and their allies. The group has more than 40 members and includes individuals as well as organizations such as Love Makes a Family; Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays chapters from around the state; the Latino Family Services Coalition; the American Civil Liberties Union of Oregon; Planned Parenthood; Youth Suicide Prevention for Umatilla County; and the United Church of Christ Central Pacific Conference.

The coalition conducts workshops for faculty and administrators in school districts around the state. They seek to promote awareness of the issues by presenting research from reputable sources and by telling the stories of individuals who have suffered from harassment.

They've had a lot of success using fact and story. "The combination moves people's hearts and minds," says Liljeholm.

Liljeholm says one of the biggest obstacles is awareness. Many schools with well-intended but unaware staff will tell them, "We don't have any sexual minorities at our school, so we don't need a presentation just on those issues."

"There is a tremendous confusion between sexual activity and sexual identity" on behalf of

some teachers and administrators, says Liljeholm. This may explain why there is more resistance to programs at the middle school level.

In one recent coalition workshop, a faculty member said that homophobic remarks were part of the culture these days and that she couldn't stop it every time she heard something in the halls or in the classroom. Before Liljeholm could respond, another teacher stood up and said, "Yes, you can."



"Although Oregon has a bully law, it doesn't go very far in actual implementation"

—Bonnie Tinker

That teacher did not accept disrespectful comments in her classroom, and her students would catch themselves and apologize when they realized they had said something they shouldn't have said.

In addition to educating faculty and community members, the coalition offers support for students. In one Portland-area school, a student request to start a GSA was initially denied. However, the city government had recently passed a nondiscrimination ordinance; the coalition had been present at the meeting and offered input. To accommodate the ordinance, the school's next reaction was to eliminate all noncurricular clubs. Ultimately, at the advice of a youth advisory council, the school allowed students to form the GSA.

The presence of a GSA in schools is important. For Tinker, a GSA shows that the school is headed in the right direction.

Liljeholm says, "There are many youth who won't come out but feel safer knowing the GSA exists."

Ayme Allison, a counselor at The Dalles Wahtonka Unified High School, helped start that school's GSA and serves as the club's adviser. She comments: "The biggest challenges we have faced have been the religious community and their undying efforts to have the GSA banned from school. They are actually even willing to forgo all clubs just to get the GSA out."

So far, the GSA has been one of the most active clubs at the school and Allison says, "I know the students who helped start it have really felt empowered by it." This year, two school districts in The Dalles merged, and the newly formed school board could put the club in jeopardy. Allison is keeping her eyes out for the issue to appear as an agenda item.

"Basically it is more of an adult problem than a kid problem," she says.

Creating safe schools is a community effort—not strictly the responsibility of the schools. Liljeholm says it is not enough to have a supportive administration, but also a school board that supports the safe schools movement. By educating community groups, the coalition creates allies that can, in turn, educate school boards.

Tinker stresses the importance of community members getting involved in the schools. She points out that schools have to work with tight budgets and need all the support they can get.

"As long as Oregon schools are strapped for resources, it's very difficult to invest in the learning environment," says Tinker.

Parent involvement is key. By staying clos-

eted, some queer parents may assume they are protecting their kids. Not so, says Tinker. "If you can get queer parents involved at the grade school level, then you can have an empowered group" by the time the kids reach middle and high school, she says.

Ultimately, though, anyone who cares about kids needs to rally behind making schools safer. Tinker says that making real change "requires people who aren't parents or who are straight parents to find out what kind of protections are in place for kids and to make themselves available as volunteers." □

KAREN KUDEJ is a Portland free-lance writer.

Help your school say no to bullies

The Oregon Safe Schools and Communities Coalition will play host to its third annual Oregon Safe Schools Training on Oct. 8 and 9 in Bend. This statewide training will empower youth and adult groups to return to their communities to initiate projects. As an incentive, the coalition will offer a \$100 grant to each team that completes its project and submits a report of its effort.

The coalition is also in the process of seeking funds to initiate a statewide GSA Network to link schools and community resources around Oregon.

For more information on the conference or the coalition, contact Joyce Liljeholm at 503-232-4556 or jlliljeh@teleport.com or visit the Internet site www.oregonsafeschools.org.

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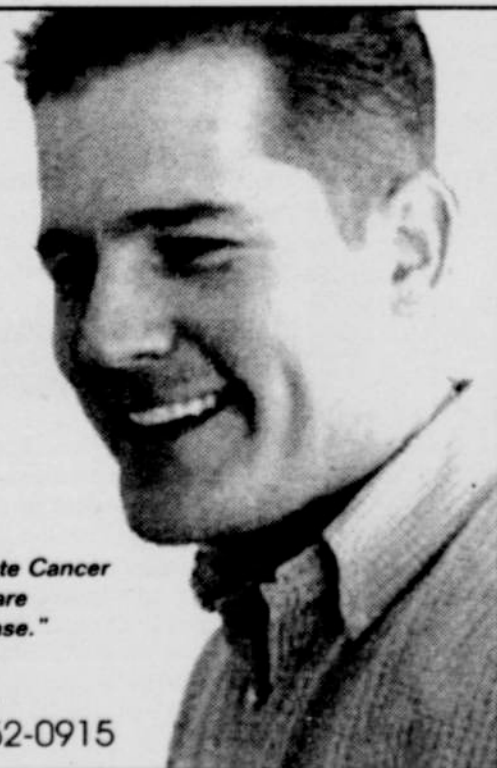
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