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NORTHWESTnews

SUBURBAN SUPPORT

SMYRC program reaches Washington County youth

by Jaymee R. Cuti

The feeling of being misunderstood is a perennial problem of youth. Sexual minority youth in the suburbs west of Portland are now being served with a program that seeks to enfranchise them and support their unique needs.

Queer and questioning youth have had access to the Sexual Minority Youth Resource Center in Southeast Portland since 1993. There, they've found a safe place to meet others, nurture their health and well-being and enhance their pride and self-esteem.

Pride Project is a SMYRC program for people ages 14 to 21 in Washington County. It is funded by the Washington County Health Department and the Commission for Children and Families.

"Pride Project is definitely important because it's the only thing like it in Washington County," said coordinator Austin Lea. Some nearby high schools have Gay Straight Alliances, and welcoming churches may have activities designed for queer youth. Beyond that, suburban queer youth are often cut off from the services that could make their teen years more bearable.

Pride Project meets twice weekly, in Beaverton and Hillsboro. Between 15 and 50 people join to discuss whatever is on their minds—often focusing on drug and alcohol prevention and safer-sex education. The group is open to gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning young people and hetero allies.

Pride Project also borrows a successful program from SMYRC called Bridge 13. The youth-led outreach workshop helps teach different groups about issues afflicting gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people. SMYRC and Pride Project participants have held Bridge 13 workshops for schools, social service providers and police and fire departments.

Participants say they have fun at Pride Project events and feel safe to be themselves—words rarely uttered from teens' mouths.

Phil "Onyx" Garry, 17, has been attending Pride Project meetings since he first came out on his 15th birthday.

After battling depression and suicidal feelings, he said Pride Project has helped make him the happy gay teen-ager he is today.

"I probably would rather be dead," said Garry, considering his life before Pride Project and SMYRC. His parents and the staff and friends he made there helped him cope with severe depression.

Vent is a peer counseling Pride Project activity that makes opening up to other teens easier. Vent All Stars, as they are called, have specialties in helping with family, school, coming out,

partner violence, suicide and other arenas affecting queer youth, though most say they are willing to talk about any and everything.

Lea is a recent graduate of Willamette University, where he studied anthropology and Spanish. The fluent Spanish speaker helps engage more Latino kids in the Pride Project.

"A lot of times minority youth in the queer community can be marginalized as well," Lea said.

After being on the job for three months, Lea has a vision for Pride Project to eventually have its own building, as SMYRC does, with multiple staff members to run the program.

Lea said when he came out as gay, his friends and family provided enough support that he did



Austin Lea runs Pride Project, a SMYRC program for suburban youth.

not seek the services of SMYRC, but he remembers the agency being helpful for many of his friends.

"I wasn't involved in SMYRC, but I had some friends who were. One thing I enjoy about the Pride Project is it's an opportunity for me to give back to the organization because a lot of my close friends did need those services," Lea said.

Lea was drawn to the job because he likes listening to people. He also enjoys the diversity of clients his program attracts.

"Pride Project is really great for me because there's a huge diversity of people there, whether from gender diversity, sexual diversity or ethnic diversity," he said.

Garry says he sometimes feels like the only gay teen in his Aloha neighborhood.

"Living in the area that I do in Aloha, it gets kind of lonely because I think I'm the only gay teen-ager in my neighborhood," he said. "My parents and my friends around here don't know what it's like for me on a day-to-day basis."

But Garry regularly participates in SMYRC and Pride Project events for social interaction and emotional support.

"If you are ever in need of counseling or support or friends, go to Pride Project or SMYRC because there will be people there that are happy to help you out," said Garry. **JM**

For more information about the PRIDE PROJECT call Lea at 503-260-5792 or visit www.prideproject.org.