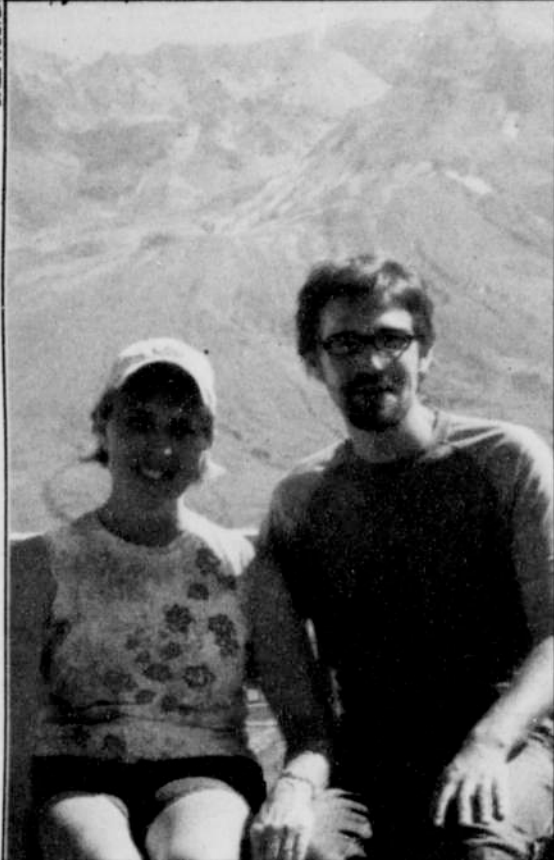




Diane Wolter and son Christopher bond in front of Mount St. Helens.

"Sometimes to know you're part of something bigger and that there are like-minded people around the state and nation makes you feel more determined to do what you know is right."

—Drew Lindell

BACK TO SCHOOL

Who cares about queer youth?

by Malka Geffen

As I recently passed the aisles full of school supplies at Walgreens, I listened to the soulful crooning of Michael McDonald on the sound system and paused to think of simpler days. Then I remembered there was nothing simple about living in the closet and hoped that things have changed dramatically for the better for today's youth.

Going back to school as a teen meant one more year of getting crushes on girls and grudgingly dating boys. The one "out" student at my high school was into theater, seemingly well-liked by some and sometimes harassed by others. The gay teacher and administrator were only outed amid rumors after their untimely deaths. This was not ideal launching ground for a young, questioning student in Tucson, Ariz.

In 2006, queer students in Oregon still struggle with the ramifications of being out or closeted. However, there are many organizations and even more determined individuals in our community that are working to make the experience of being gay in school better and safer. Let's meet and salute them.

THE VOLUNTEER

I met with Larry Smith at Sunset West Tanning in Beaverton on a cloudy morning, which is perfect weather for getting an assisted tan. Smith is the owner of the salon, but he's also Oregon's Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network co-chairman. A retired teacher of 31 years, he has been volunteering with GLSEN since 1996 and has been co-chairman of the organization for the past six years.

"I'm excited about helping teachers and administrators create a safe place for kids in schools," said Smith.

When he first became involved, he said he came out in the process. "I asked the then Beaverton superintendent, 'If I'm 50 years old and a teacher, how can my students feel safe about coming out unless I do?'"

GLSEN, which was established nationally in 1995, is "the largest national network of students, parents, educators and others ending discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity/expression in K-12 schools."

"The greatest revolution in schools is helping kids understand what their rights are, and we do that through the GSA," said Smith. According to the San Francisco-based Gay Straight Alliance Network, "a Gay Straight Alliance is a student-run club, typically in a high school, which provides a safe place for students to meet, support each other, talk about issues related to sexual orientation and work to end homophobia."

Smith outlined some of the activities GLSEN supports through the efforts of individual GSAs:

- The second annual Ally Week, Oct. 15 to 21, is the first big event of the year. According to GLSEN, Ally Week "is about identifying and supporting allies in your school and asking them to sign the Ally Pledge to intervene in bullying and harassment throughout the school year."

- Sticks & Stones is GLSEN Oregon's No Name-Calling Week, Jan. 22 to 27, 2007, when high school students will give presentations at middle schools. According to GLSEN, the problem of name-calling is particularly acute in grades five through eight.

- The 11th annual Day of Silence is April 18, 2007. Founded in 1996 at University of Virginia, the Day of Silence is now observed by tens of thousands of students across the country. According to GLSEN, "Whether used to educate classmates on the damaging effects of anti-LGBT bullying and harassment or to demand passage of a statewide nondiscriminatory act inclusive of LGBT people, the Day of Silence is an awesome opportunity to create more inclusive school environments." Break-the-silence events such as Portland's Night of Noise allow students to share their silence experiences as well as their coming-out stories. According to Smith, 80 to 100 students usually attend.

- The Oregon Queer Youth Conference, Nike Career Day and Pride festivals in Portland, Vancouver, Salem and Eugene are a few of the other events that queer students can participate in throughout the state.

GLSEN also provides curricular resources and gives presentations to faculty, staff and counselors who, according to Smith, are often the first people an at-risk youth will contact.

For more information visit www.glsenoregon.org or www.glsen.org.

THE PARENT

I love my parents, but I didn't give them the opportunity to support me in my coming-out process until I was 24. Some parents, like Diane Wolter of Keizer—whose 27-year-old gay son, Christopher, came out at about age 12—are much luckier. "I pulled him out of the closet," she said.

Wolter started the first GSA in Salem in 2001. A Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays mom since 1998, Wolter said she'd heard that there were successful GSAs in Massachusetts and thought McNary High School should have one, too. Wolter and all three of her children attended the school.

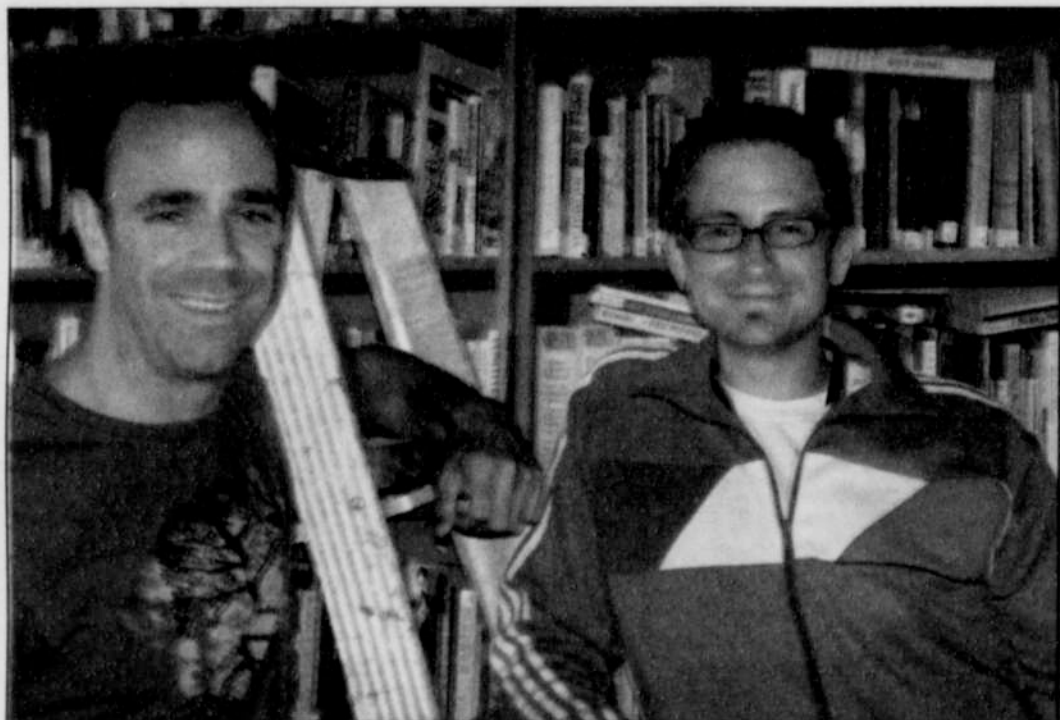
After getting the superintendent's OK, Wolter helped the students find a teacher adviser and hold their first meeting. According to Wolter, 35 students showed up that day and many have been coming to the GSA meetings every Thursday ever since.

"The kids are just awesome!" said Wolter. "They would say the GSA makes the climate a little better in school and gives them support that a lot of them don't have at home."

Wolter believes the club is very significant in the lives of individual students. "I've had kids come to me who feel very suicidal at times and say they wouldn't know what they'd do without the GSA."

"We're not just discussing being gay or straight," Wolter said of the GSA.

Continued on Page 24



Stephen Dunlevy (left) and Jonathan Weedman bring Portland-area queer youth together.



A large group gathers for the first meeting of the year for Reed College's Queer Alliance.