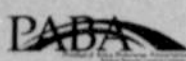


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Continued from Page 9

The event, which essentially functioned like a pageant with three costume changes, raised more than \$7,000 for charity.

While Strong's "fantasy" trucker costume was rooted in authenticity—Strong was a truck driver by trade for 15 years before switching to massage therapy less than a year ago—he thinks his honest, sincere embodiment of what it means to be a bear tipped votes in his favor.

Our House Holds Auction

Portland is borrowing the moniker "The Emerald City" in the name of raising cash for Our House of Portland on St. Patrick's Day.

The eighth annual For Love & Money benefit event is Our House's biggest fund-raising event of the year.

Held from 6 to 10 p.m. March 17, the event includes a silent auction, a cocktail hour, dinner, a live auction and entertainment, hosted by local performer Dale Johannes.

The benefit is at the Hilton Hotel, 921 S.W. Sixth Ave. Tickets are \$130, available by calling 503-736-9276 or e-mailing events@ourhouseofportland.org.

Equality Rides Again

The 2007 Equality Ride is a project of Soulforce, a national civil rights and social justice organization that promotes the vision of freedom for queers from religious and political oppression through the practice of relentless nonviolent resistance.

On March 8, 50 young adults will board two buses, west and east, for an eight-week trip that will bring them to 32 Christian colleges with climates or policies that silence queer students. Their mission is to open a dialogue about the painful consequences of discrimination and the religion-based prejudice that sustains it.

More than 200 U.S. colleges and universities have explicit policies that discriminate against queer students. In 2006, the inaugural Equality Ride traveled to 19 of those schools and held vigils, Bible studies, class discussions and community forums. This year the ride's reach has nearly doubled.

At Brigham Young University in Utah last year, Equality Riders were barred from making formal presentations or speeches. Nine current and former BYU students joined the Equality Riders in a "die-in" to represent the hundreds of young people who have ended their lives because of the Mormon Church's teachings on homosexuality. A total of 24 young leaders were arrested for trespassing on school grounds.

According to Corvallis resident and lone Oregon rider Tab Dansby, the west bus will reach Oregon in early April and will visit George Fox University in Newberg on April 5. For more information or to sponsor Dansby, visit www.equalityride.com.

Youth Center Fills Void

Mark Nathan Lee has a plan to help queer youth in the tri-cities area of Washington. On March 1, the Vista Youth Center in Kennewick opened its doors to provide a safe place where queer youths can gain information, support and empowerment.

When Lee was a volunteer for Planned Parenthood, he discovered that none of the high schools in the tri-cities of Kennewick, Pasco and Richland had Gay Straight Alliances. The school's sexual education programs only taught about abstinence. It was apparent to Lee that something had to be done.

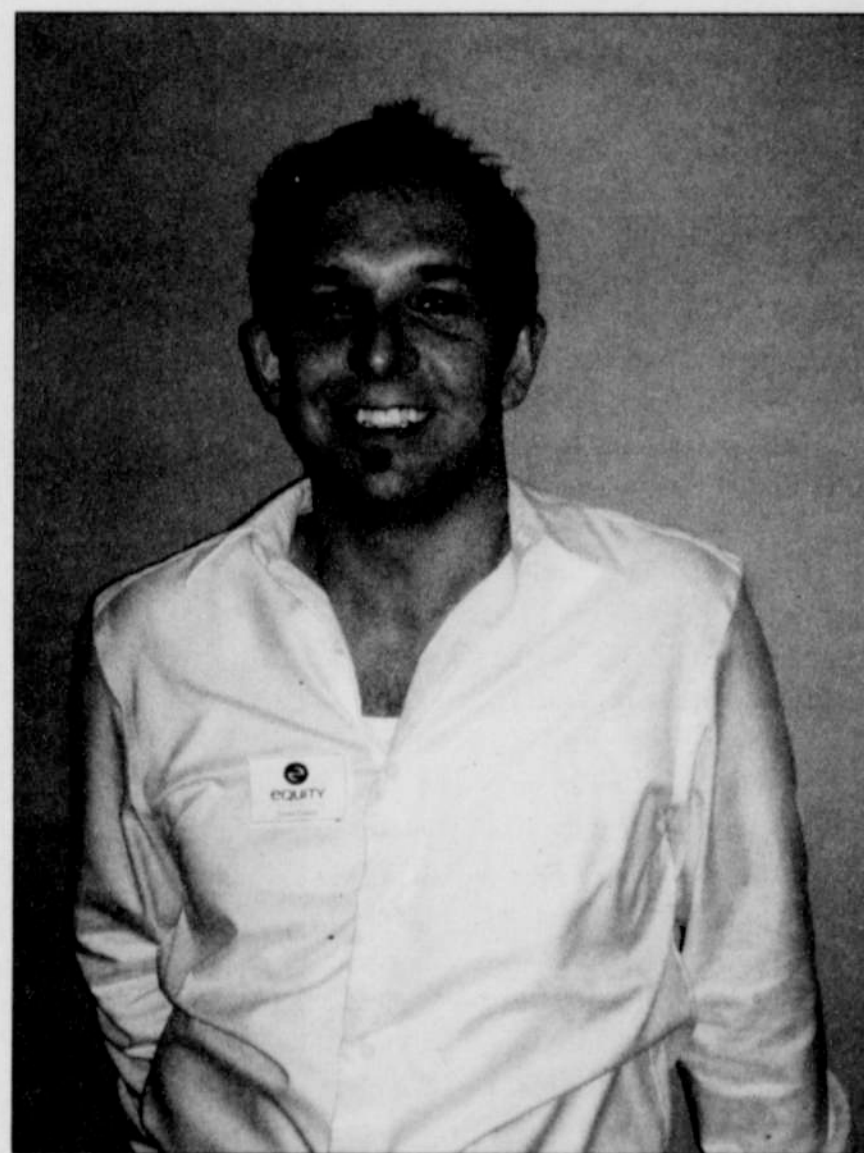
The Vista Youth Center aims to be a safe place where queer youth can hang out. Vista will provide sexual education and teach about HIV/AIDS and STD prevention.

Planned Parenthood and the Benton-Franklin Health District employees will provide HIV and emotional counseling and will help queer youth with self-esteem, communication skills, goal-setting and peer suicide prevention. Vista will also have bilingual volunteers for the Hispanic queer population.

Fund raising, Lee says, is his biggest challenge. There is enough funding for Vista to be open from 3 to 8 p.m. Thursdays, but he hopes that will expand after two months. Planned Parenthood and Benton-Franklin Health District have been generous, he says, and are willing to pay their employees for the first two months Vista is open. Lee hopes to get 100 donors to pledge an amount every month for a year. "There has been a lot of support from the community and the press," says Lee. A total of 26 people have applied to volunteer, and one-third are bilingual.

For more information call 971-344-6121 or visit www.vistayouthcenter.org or www.myspace.com/vistayouthcenter. **JO**

By JAYMEE R. CUTI, MALKA GEFFEN and MEGAN PEURA



Mark Nathan Lee is helping queer youth of Eastern Washington find acceptance.

MELISSA MORALES