

northwest

Queer Youth Identify

Conference gives kids a place to be themselves

by West Duncan

One word sums up the students at Catlin Gable School in charge of putting on this year's Oregon Queer Youth Conference: brave.

As many face their teenage years in survival mode, these students are making it possible for gay youth to do more than just survive high school. The pupils of Students and Friends for Equality (SAFE) have put their own identities on the line for the sake of others to be able to do the same.

"This gives a place for kids to go and relax, check out different identities and see what it's like to be who you want to be," said Sue Phillips, librarian and co-adviser for SAFE. "I wish I was that comfortable at their age."

For the fourth year in a row, SAFE has played host to the conference, drawing teens from Ashland to La Pine. The daylong conference addresses everything from queer health and safe sex to the poetry of Walt Whitman. Taught by teens and adults, the workshops educate in an accessible way for all to be actively involved.

One such workshop, "Life as an Amoeba," provides information not ordinarily discussed in the standard "birds and bees" talk. SAFE member Blake Zwerling, a 17-year-old who identifies as an "asexual hetero-romantic" woman, leads this group to supply her peers with information about not having sex.

"Life among the world is very confusing," said Zwerling. "In a lot of ways, being asexual keeps my life simple. I want people to know that it's there. It wasn't until OQYC that I had a lightning bolt and realized that you could be asexual."

Stewart Towle, an 18-year-old who identifies as "homo-flexible," also sees the direct need for this conference to exist for himself and his peers. Acting as the co-president for SAFE and the head organizer for the conference, he is passionate about this gathering being a tool for anyone facing the isolation that comes from being different.

"The OQYC was the first place I felt safe being myself," he said. "I feel like there are plenty of places to look that will help you with your struggle, but all I want to do is meet people."

Towle's experience is not unlike many others who are embracing the headway being made in queer visibility. Instead of a growing number of hate crimes in high schools, there are increased numbers of Gay Straight Alliances around the country. Groups like SAFE are beginning to have a place on campus thanks to the success of conferences like these.

Another ally present to lend its support is the Sexual Minority Resource Center. The Portland organization has partnered with the event since 2004. This year, it hosted a sleep-over for youth traveling far to attend the conference.

Rej Joo, an AmeriCorps health education specialist for SMYRC, has been with the organization for six months and already sees the impact of a younger generation being out and proud. "We hear about these kids telling others about SMYRC, the OQYC and other things and how their faces just light up!" said Joo.

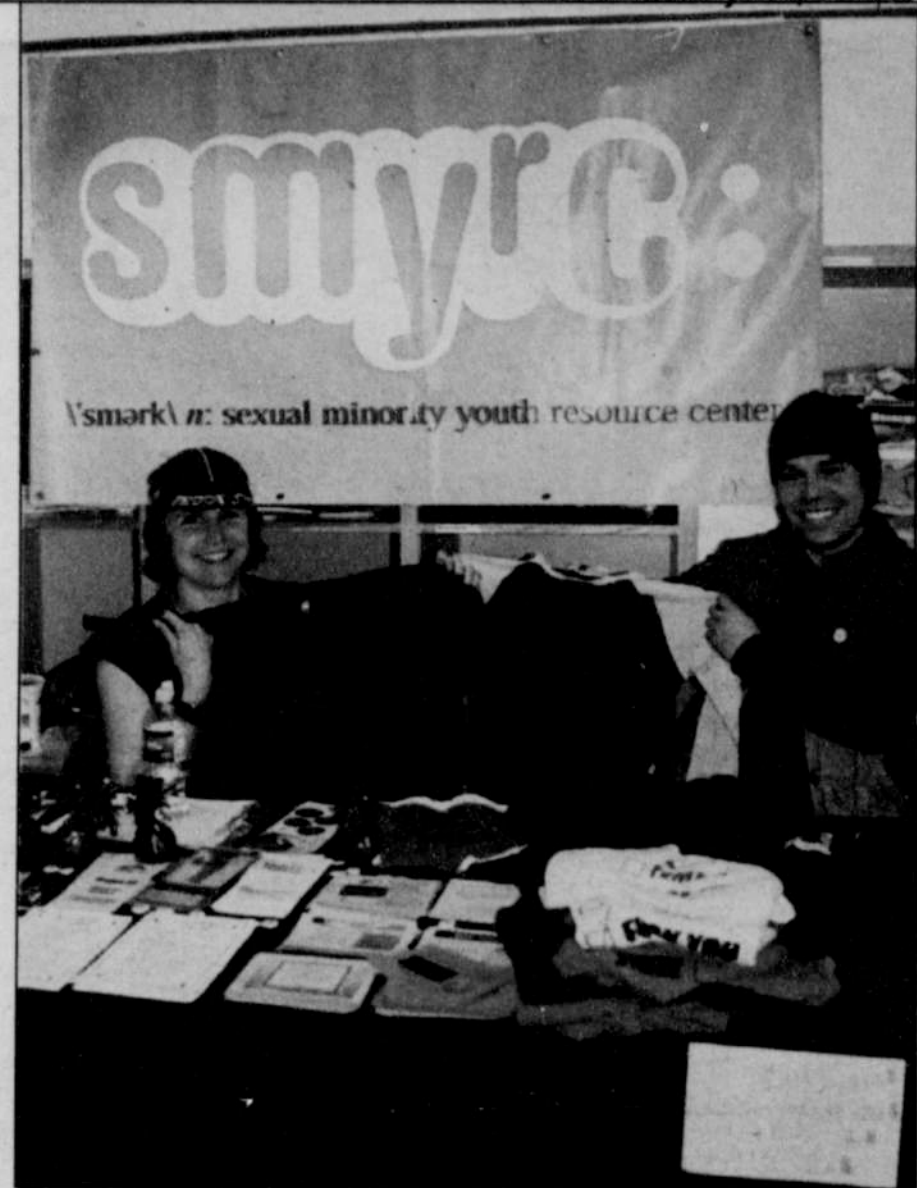
The conference is not only a place for youth to let themselves question and discuss their truths, but to speak them to each other. For many, openly discussing their sexuality with friends and family isn't an option, either, or the subject is tip-toed around. The conference provides the safety of peers and faculty when there are sometimes no other places to go.

"For me, dealing with teenage angst and being so confused is hard. When I came to the Oregon Queer Youth Conference, it was OK to be confused," said Zwerling.

When just having options can be the hardest

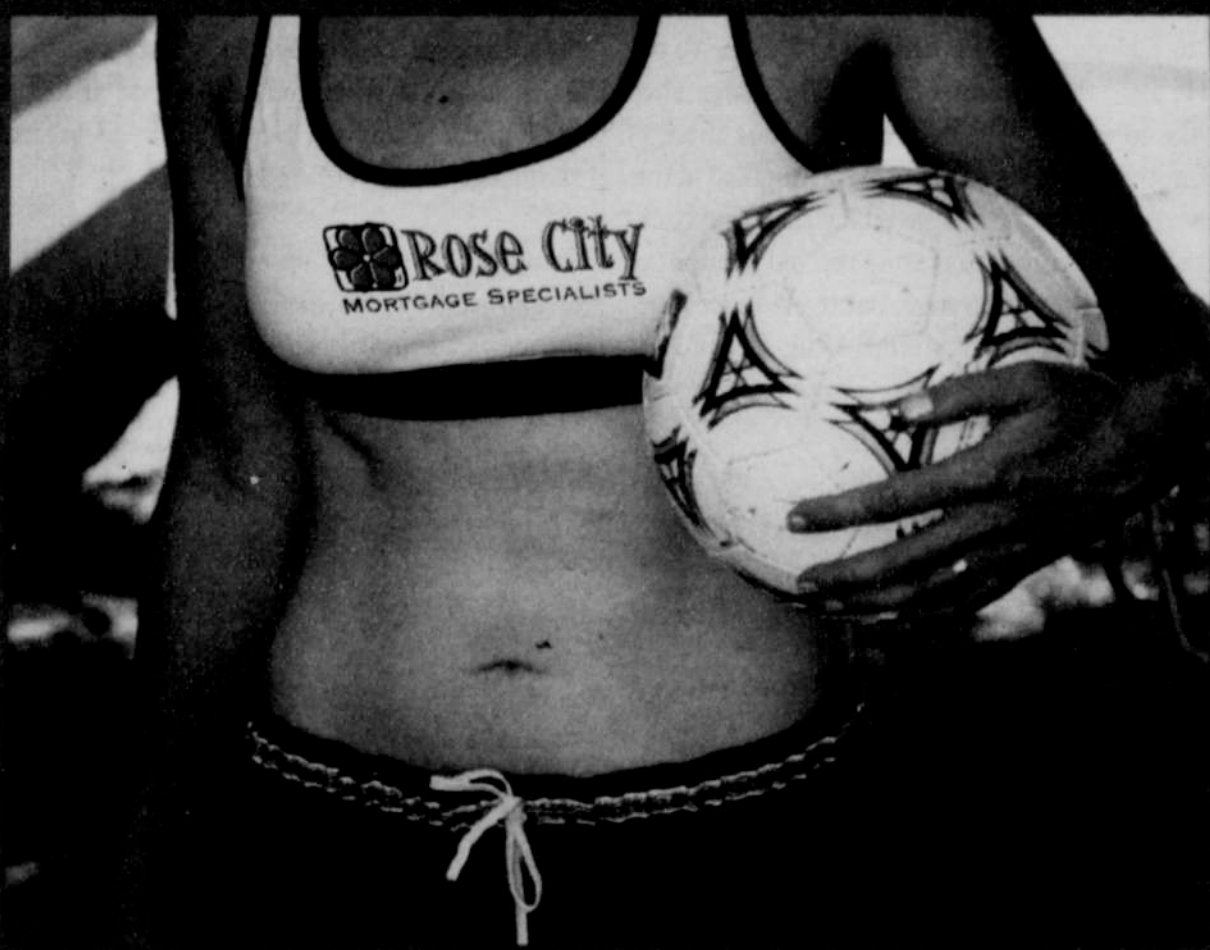
thing to find, the kids of SAFE and all who make the conference possible present a spectrum of choices for anyone who attends. The reward is a new sense of possibility and hope for what is to come. 10

Portland freelance writer WEST DUNCAN can be reached at westofaminor@yahoo.com.



SMYRC supervisor Zan Gibbs and clinical intern counselor Nathan Smith lend a helping hand at the Oregon Queer Youth Conference.

AS DEDICATED AS YOUR team,
AS DEPENDABLE AS YOUR goalie,
AND AS SUPPORTIVE AS YOUR
FAVORITE sports bra!



503 768.4248

WE CARE ABOUT MORE THAN JUST
MORTGAGES—WE KNOW YOU DO TOO.

ROSECITYMTG.COM

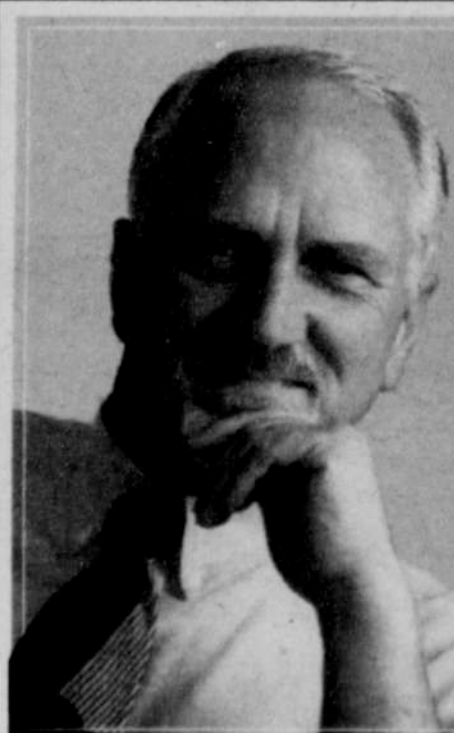
Easter Sunday

Portland
April 8th
Broadway
9am - 503-281-8868

Sunrise Service 6A

7:15A

Worship Services 8:30A & 11A



Don Clarkson, Realtor

FOUNDER OF
• First Thursday Realtors
• Realty Referrals
• Cascade Guild

Don Clarkson is a member of the
National Association of Realtors
503-295-4777 • don@clarksonrealty.com