



For the past 10 years, and in a couple of locations, SMYRC has been a central resource for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and questioning youth in the greater Portland area. Its founders—including Zan Gibbs, who still heads the center—and their predecessors knew that a place where sexual minority youth could come without fear was crucial. That sense of protection from a sometimes-cruel world has been vital for many through the years.

Aaron Rivas, a self-identified "homoflexible" 20-year-old, has been coming to SMYRC for

seven months, since moving to Portland. SMYRC gives kids "the freedom to be ourselves," he explained. "If you want to come in fairy wings, you can.... No one's gonna care."

He's not the only one who's noticed this laissez-faire attitude toward self-expression. It's been a conscious effort for those running the center to provide a place where queer kids can be queer kids. Regardless of how they identify or how they convey their individuality, they are accepted and will find others who are similar.

Jonathan Weedman, SMYRC's program man-

ager, knows it's rare: "It's huge, huge, just to be able to walk in and however you identify yourself, you will find someone who identifies the same." For some kids, this is the only place they can come to truly figure out who they are and what they want and to play with their own self-expression without fear of mockery or abuse.

That aspect of acceptance is vital for these kids, and the SMYRC staff works diligently to make sure everyone who comes feels included, sometimes for the first time in their lives. When a transgender youth who identified only as Ser-

ena began coming to SMYRC nearly a year ago, she was filled with anger and fear. She began attending group and individual counseling sessions at the center and eventually learned to accept herself and understand her sexuality and is now "feeling more level." What she's learned at SMYRC, she explained, has helped her deal with rude comments and outright stares. It has made life bearable.

The Founding

Youth build SMYRC from the ground up
by Pat Young

The Sexual Minority Youth Resource Center has its roots in a youth art program offered at Phoenix Rising, which was an organization that specialized in counseling for the queer community. Trevor Sangrey was one of the youths in the art program, Personal Deity Proxy, when United Way announced it had money for youth-driven programs.

Allanya Gunther of Phoenix Rising approached the art group and asked if anyone was interested in pursuing this opportunity. Sangrey and two other youths said they were. They had guidance from Gunther, but Sangrey and one other youth wrote the grant. In 1997 they secured \$50,000 from United Way to start a youth resource center.

Now that they had the money to house a resource center, the youth had to develop programs.

The core group who created SMYRC were pretty savvy organizers. Zan Gibbs was instrumental in those early days. Gibbs was a volunteer with Phoenix Rising and participated in forming SMYRC.

The group also had guidance from Joyful Freeman of Phoenix Rising.

"Many youth were involved in coming up with ideas and helping to prepare materials," noted Sangrey. "Joyful is extremely gifted as an organizer and had a way of working with us that empowered the youth to make their own choices while also encouraging us to make good and careful decisions."

One of the first objectives was to find a space. They found a vacant building on East Burnside Street between Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard and Grand Avenue that once housed a tattoo parlor. The place needed a lot of work: new carpet, fresh paint and electrical work. Friends and parents pitched in with renovations; one of the first was painting over the large swastika on a basement wall.

"We thought it was a little bit ironic that a sexual minority youth resource center was moving in where there formally might have been some Nazi activity," noted Gibbs.

The building's two large windows were painted to create a confidential space, and the word "SMYRC" was not emblazoned on the door for the same reason. SMYRC, however, wasn't the agency's first name. It was SMYRF—with the F standing for "Facility." Smurfs characters were

used on some of the group's early fliers. Things were fine until they got a cease-and-desist letter from the cartoon's attorney.

When the center opened in April 1998, 15 to 20 people used the facility twice a week. After a grand opening ceremony in May, numbers quickly increased. Within a year and a half, at least 80 people were using the resource center, which was then open four days a week.

During the first year, SMYRC sponsored a prom. Gibbs recalled that it was believed to have been the first queer prom in the state. At least 300 people attended.

Despite the gain in popularity, locals still didn't know what SMYRC was. Some adults would wander in, thinking it was still a tattoo parlor. Since SMYRC was open late on Fridays and Saturdays, a few drunk adults would stumble in and ask if they could play pool, Gibbs said.

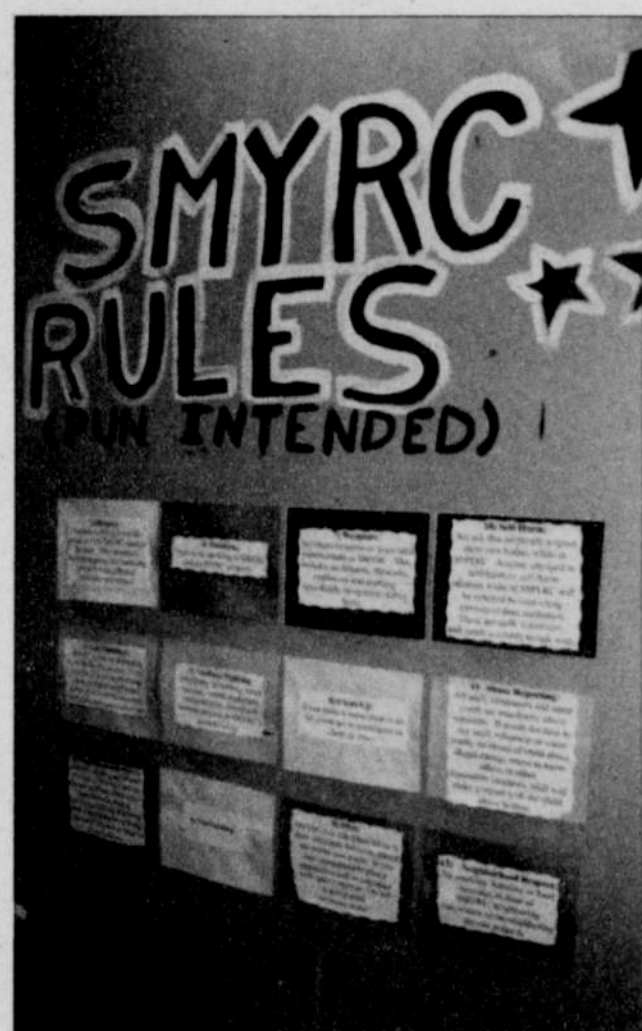
After a few years, they had outgrown the space. In February 2001, SMYRC moved to 2100 S.E. Belmont St. with the help of an \$80,000 moving grant from Multnomah County. Once again, the building needed a lot of work. There were no interior walls, no handicapped-accessible bathroom, no kitchen. The grant money was definitely needed for renovation as well as moving.

A main part of the Belmont location is the stage where the youth can perform. Gibbs said a highlight in recent years was when a donor gave \$5,000 to SMYRC with special instructions for the youth to spend it on something for themselves—not on rent or staffing. Gibbs said the youth steering committee gave serious thought about how to use the money. They decided to upgrade the stage by adding a curtain, stage lights and a sound system. They also purchased a button-making machine and a silkscreen press for making T-shirts, which they sell at Pride.

Gibbs said it is hard to believe that 10 years have gone by. "I could hardly wrap my brain around the fact that it was 10 years, because it feels like two days. Things are always different."

But one thing helps Gibbs recognize how much time has passed: when former SMYRC kids—or "old youth," as Gibbs calls them—return for a visit. Gibbs said this always makes her day. 

Portland freelance writer PAT YOUNG is a gay and lesbian historian.



Respect for individuals is built into SMYRC's personality.

Dozens of other kids come to SMYRC for counseling, and Weedman is often the one to help them find the services they most need. Some kids come from abusive backgrounds. Others are dealing with mental health issues. A few need serious medical intervention. Having counselors on staff and as part of Cascadia Behavioral Healthcare helps assist each youth with what they need.

Self-identity and self-expression are two areas that are often dealt with in counseling and in general discussion at SMYRC. Kids at SMYRC are working on painting a "gender canvas" (affectionately referred to by many as "the Gender Gumby") on the wall. Similar to the Kinsey scale in nature, it gives more latitude in defining oneself on sex,

Continued on Page 26

Spring Into FREE Lunch

Be Our Guests
at Rainbow Vista Active Senior Living Community!

Studio Apartments \$595

1 Bedroom Apartments \$745

Call Today For A Tour and We'll Provide Lunch
Prepared By Our Expert Chef!



Rainbow Vista

(503) 667-5575 (888) 470-0130
www.rainbowvista.com



under **U** 4men

designer underwear & swimwear
507 sw broadway
DOWNTOWN PORTLAND
bridgeport village
NOW OPEN

(503) 274-2555 | www.underU4men.com



aussieBum
SWIMWEAR

OUT DANCING Learn
to
Dance



Cha Cha Rumba Country Swing Waltz Foxtrot www.outdancing.info

503-236-5129