

For Queer Youth, by Queer Youth

Co-founder upholds SMYRC's model
by Teresa Coates

Zan Gibbs rarely sits still. There's a perpetual to-do list, and as the Sexual Minority Youth Resource Center's director, Gibbs is trying to get it all done. Kids come in for all sorts of reasons, and it's Gibbs' responsibility to make sure they get what they need, whether it's help with a hair dye job, one-on-one counseling or a hot meal.

"It's a different job every day," Gibbs noted. "It's always challenging, never boring and never easy."

Often credited with starting SMYRC, Gibbs actually walked into the development in progress. After having seen an ad for Phoenix Rising in *Just Out*, Gibbs began volunteering by entering data for the nonprofit.

At the time, two other kids were already in the process of getting a queer youth center established. Asked to join them, Gibbs accepted, and the three formed the first steering committee and went to work. From the beginning, SMYRC was run by and for queer youth. Gibbs has made sure that continues to be the model by which it's run, allowing the youth to decide on the policies, guidelines and even the mission statement.

Although Gibbs technically sets the rules, they aren't always followed. One youth recently asked for a fog machine in the main room, to be used in plays or for dances. "No fog machine" was the edict. Momentarily dejected, the same kid brought in a fog machine the next afternoon. Undaunted, Gibbs hasn't allowed it to be used.

Whether trying to enforce house rules or sorting through donations, Gibbs is dedicated to making SMYRC as valuable as possible to the youth it serves. "It's all about giving these kids some control over their lives," Gibbs said. That goal is clear in the respon-

sibilities handed over to the youth with rare input and guidance from Gibbs, program manager Jonathan Weedman and other SMYRC employees. A constant presence at the center, Gibbs provides regularity to many whose lives are filled with inconsistency.

Tori Scott, a member of SMYRC's Bridge 13 project, raved about Gibbs' dedication: "It's great when I walk in and Zan is happy to see me. Zan supports each and every person that comes in."

All the hard work and dedication has paid off, and SMYRC youth, both past and present, are grateful for Gibbs' decade-long investment in the agency. "The staff's my favorite part of SMYRC," said Aaron Rivas. "We have their undivided attention, and they'll help us do whatever we really want." 10



Zan Gibbs, then.



Zan Gibbs, now.

Continued from Page 25

gender, orientation and perception. (See sidebar.) Painted on the wall, the gender canvas will allow the kids to plot where they are, changing it up as necessary.

Change is one constant at SMYRC, with something new happening all the time. With kids from every socio-economic level and an array of pansexual, trans and gay youth, no day is the same as the one that came before, but that's the way both kids and staff enjoy it. Always at the ready with resources and a listening ear, staffers

genesis at the Jingle Bell Run, wearing his shortest running shorts, of course. Each week, the self-designated members (up to about 15 now) gather together to go for a jog, inspired by the group's theme: "Always forward, never straight."

Whether kids are interested in jogging, drama, reading or cooking, they can find (or establish) a group to pursue their interests with other queer kids.

"SMYRC promotes a nonviolent, healthy and respectful community by using various resources and support to empower sexual and gender minority youth in connecting with each other, believing in themselves and ultimately inspiring positive social change."

Mission Statement, Revised March 2008

like Weedman are eager to make the center the absolute best resource for queer youth, and after 10 years, he says, "we're in a good place" to serve the community in more ways than before.

Kids come together at SMYRC, crowded around computers that line the back corner or lying around on the mismatched furniture. They all come because they identify as queer but often find other interests that bring them together. Groups of all types form, and are disbanded, depending on the goals they want at the time. Rivas began an '80s jogging group last December, christening its

SMYRC-sponsored groups include Bridge 13 and Breathe Free. Founded as a youth speakers bureau before SMYRC was officially founded, Bridge 13 is still running strong, popular with both youth and the community. Several times a month, teams of queer youth visit schools, hospitals, businesses and other organizations in an effort to educate and familiarize them with issues surrounding the queer community and youth in particular. Tori Scott, a member of Bridge 13, explained that their role is to "teach the community to not be 'f-ed' up to queers," a problem that



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