

northwest

Learning to Listen

Trans man works within the system to reach queer youth

by Jacob Anderson-Minshall

Rej Joo may have stumbled into his career working with queer teens, but since then he's become solidly committed to helping Portland's queer youth help themselves.

A few years ago, Joo ("just a guy" who identifies politically as a trans man) had just earned his psychology degree when he took an AmeriCorps position with the Sexual Minority Youth Resource Center.

As SMYRC's first health education specialist, Joo collaborated with the organization's tobacco prevention coordinator, R.E. Szego, on Breathe Free, a statewide queer smoking prevention and education initiative. Hoping to raise awareness about the tactics the tobacco industry uses to target marginalized populations, they examined tobacco use and other risk-taking behaviors by masculine characters in popular films, television and advertising, and presented a number of papers and workshops, including "Smokin' Hot 'n' Butch: Tobacco, Masculinity & the LGBTQ Communities."

"Why is it sexy that this guy is smoking?" Joo asks rhetorically. "The Marlboro Man and Shane [a butch lesbian on Showtime's *The L Word*]...the more masculine characters tend to be smoking, and people see that as being hot."

Joo says he was most impressed by SMYRC's youth empowerment model, which provided the clientele a voice in decision-making and a stake in developing organization policy. "Just giving [youth] the ownership of the space and the environment...[was] amazing. I know this theory is around a lot of youth organizations, but the way it's actually implemented is different; SMYRC truly embodies that."

Just as Joo's AmeriCorps tenure was winding down, he was approached by Outside In—an agency dedicated to providing low-income adults and homeless youth with services like transitional housing, a community health clinic, the Trans/Identity Resource Centre and Virginia Woolf, the first doggie day care in the country that's also a job training program. When it offered him a job

spearheading a pilot project that targeted homeless queer youth, he quickly signed on.

"Working with LGBT youth—specifically within the homeless youth continuum...was very much a learning experience. I went from small SMYRC, where we had like 10 staff, to hundreds of staff."

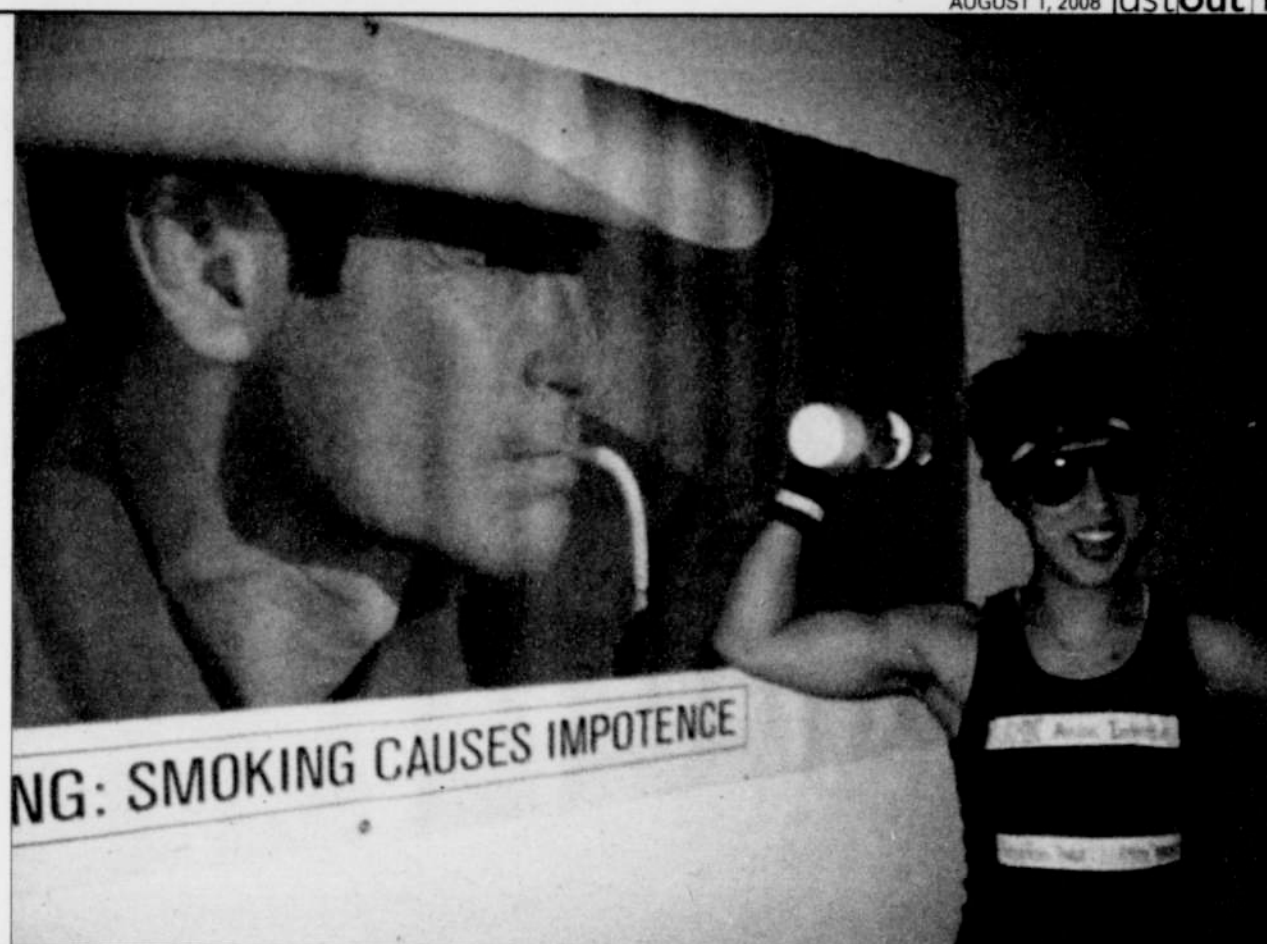
A year and a half later, Joo has settled into his Outside In position, but his experience at SMYRC—especially the organization's youth empowerment model—continues to inform his work.

"We do a lot of focus groups," Joo explains. "The rules and...activities we do, those are all really generated by youth. Working with any kind of youths, whether it's ethnic minorities or whatever, the best way is to just ask them...they're the experts."

Approximately 60 percent of homeless youth in Portland identify as queer, and Joo says resolving the problem won't be easy, because there are complex reasons for homelessness among youth. "Some youth are so immersed in the street culture that being part of mainstream society isn't an option. Then you have the youth that get kicked out [because they're queer]. And you have youth that are queer, but the reason why they're homeless isn't because of their queer identity; it's really because of abusive household or whatever."

There's no easy answer, Joo contends. "I don't think there's one solution to really alleviating or minimizing queer youth and trans youth from being on the streets. We can focus our energy into supporting youth who got kicked out, because that really almost never happens with straight youth. So...that would make sense, but if we're focusing on that effort, we're neglecting maybe 35 [percent] to 40 percent of the queer youth that are on the street."

Happy that there are adult queers who—remembering the struggles they once faced—are trying to give back to the younger generation, Joo argues that well-meaning adults often "offer advice, and that's not always the most helpful thing." Especially, he says, when the advice is



Rej Joo helped launch an anti-smoking campaign geared toward the queer community.

about dealing with issues no longer relevant to the younger generation.

To become useful allies, Joo suggests "just being open...letting them know that you're willing to listen. [Start] building that rapport with them, and eventually they'll open up, and when they do, just listen. Oftentimes they don't get a chance to talk about their identities or struggles."

However, there's one identity youth generally don't want to discuss: being homeless.

"Being homeless is just another source of shame for some of them," Joo explains. There are situations where these youth feel comfortable being out about that identity, he says, but plenty of others where they don't. He suggests being aware of (and sometimes avoiding) situations that would "out" their lack of permanent residence.

As a Korean American, Joo sees advantages and challenges in Asian gender roles and stereotypes. "It's kind of nice," he says, "that I don't have to measure my masculinity [against] hyper-masculinity stereotypes, but...being in a predominantly white culture, and being the Asian guy, there's the stereotype that I'm always going to be the feminine one. That's kind of frustrating, and I don't know if that's what most Asian men feel like."

Sometimes, Joo says, he misses living in New York, where "there's actually a queer Korean group, and I felt like that was my community—that I didn't have to explain about our culture. And I kind of miss that piece."

When he moved to Oregon, Joo says he also discovered that when it came to trans men, Portland had "no community cohesiveness, no groups." He quickly set about resolving that problem, founding and co-facilitating an FTM support group that continues to meet each month at Q Center.

And Joo has been able to participate from afar in the New York-based Dari Project, an online effort to develop resources and increase awareness and acceptance of queer people of Korean descent, by documenting and sharing life stories of queer Koreans and their families and friends.

"Portland is such a predominantly white place and I'm working with mostly white queer and trans youth, but I think, proportionately, there are more youth of color among the homeless than in the rest of the population, so in that sense, I'm working more with people color, but it's still a very small percentage."

Those youth who are from ethnic minorities feel another level of discrimination, Joo claims. "[It] forces them to put the queer part aside and really deal with the race issues first. Because they face more slurs...regarding their racial background...that's the primary struggle, even though I'm working with them in a queer venue." 10

TRANZ GUYS—a discussion group for trans, intersex, genderqueer and questioning folks who were assigned female at birth—meets from 6 to 8 p.m. every third Sunday at Q Center, 69 S.E. Taylor St. For more information visit www.pdxqcenter.org.



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