

Making It Better

Queer youth do it for themselves at annual summit BY ERIN ROOK

Growing up queer or trans—particularly in conservative rural and suburban areas—can be a lesson in loneliness. A lack of visibility and support can discourage youth from coming out, reinforcing a cycle of silence. The young activists behind the Oregon Queer Youth Summit are reaching out to queer and trans-identified youth across the Pacific Northwest to create a network of support.

"OQYS is a safe place for lots of queer youth, even ones that aren't out yet, to learn about things they haven't learned about, to meet people they may not have met at their schools," says Oliver Hanson, 16, at a work party meeting of the summit's organizers.

The event, held May 14 at Portland State University, will offer queer and trans-identified youth and their allies a full day of free peer-led workshops, caucuses and keynote speeches by local youth leaders. OQYS will also provide breakfast and lunch and a \$5 gift card for those who attend the full day. Officially in its second year, the summit is an "amalgamation" of similar smaller events.

"Community members and members of local GLBTQ social service organizations decided to pool our efforts (and budgets) into one great GLBTQ youth summit a year, instead of various small conferences," explains Mo Kenny, 26, Pride Project program coordinator for the Sexual and Gender Minority Youth Resource Center. "OQYS is a chance for us GLBTQ youth and allies from all over Oregon to talk about what we are doing, what we want to do and how we can get there."

What *aren't* queer youth doing? When it comes to organizing the summit, adults are just around to do the dirty work—setting up, cleaning up, providing an "official" face for funders.

"They do everything," says Ernesto Dominguez, 23, youth technology specialist for Cascade AIDS Project and volunteer coordinator for OQYS.



MARTY DAVIS

The planning committee, a 50-50 mix of youth (defined as ages 12-23) and young adult staff members of organizations such as SMYRC and Cascade AIDS Project, is driving the "by youth, for youth" message home even harder this year.

Case in point: Mayor Sam Adams won't be speaking at this year's summit. With the exception of 27-year-old Katelyn Cusanelli—the first transgender person to star on MTV's *The Real World*—all the keynote speakers will be local queer youth leaders.

"The young people on the committee decided they didn't want a bunch of adults speaking," Dominguez says.

The summit will give youth plenty of opportunities to make their voices heard. Youth-created workshops cover everything from coming out and suicide prevention to drag 101 and starting an activist movement. Hanson, who taught a poetry and songwriting workshop last year, will lead workshops on the importance of gender-neutral bathrooms in youth spaces and the plurality of sexual iden-

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-ERNESTO DOMINGUEZ, 23, VOLUNTEER COORDINATOR FOR OQYS, ON THE DECISION TO HAVE ONLY YOUNG PEOPLE AS KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

tity. ("Everyone has a sexuality, whether you're queer or not, whether you've had sex or not.")

The event will also feature three caucuses: one for adult mentors (such as GSA advisers), one for gender nonconforming youth and one called Youth Voice, which will include a representative from the White House, seeking perspectives from queer youth.

Despite the wealth of activities planned for the summit, members of the organizing committee agree that the biggest benefit of the event is simply the space that it provides.

"It gives youth an opportunity to interact with each other on their own terms," says 23-year-old SMYRC intern Kayla Johnston, "to create a network."

This connection is vital for both personal and political struggles. In the effort to gain visibility, it provides role models. In maintaining the will to go on, it offers affirmation. In fighting for equality, it gives strength and solidarity.

"We're all being oppressed and we all need to stick together and fight for everyone else's rights," Hanson says. He's tired of the message from gay and lesbian activists that bisexual and transgender people need to wait for their "turn" for equality. "People aren't being educated on other issues," he says. "We should all just be one movement."

Lee Hancock, 18, describes the summit as "a place to hang out, educate yourself and meet people like you." He says the wide age range (the workshops are open to ages 12-23) means youth have the opportunity to learn from peers who have been in their shoes.

"Bullying is a major issue," Hancock says. "There hasn't been a known incident [of bullying-related suicide] in a while but that doesn't mean that it stops. If [OQYS] even helps slow that down a little bit, that's better than not doing anything at all."

OQYS is about making things better instead of waiting for "It Gets Better" to arrive. Whether "better" looks like starting up a new Gay-Straight Alliance, coming out or simply quelling feelings of loneliness, it's about putting youth in the driver's seat.

"This is about making our schools safer and our communities more accepting. This is about youth supporting youth to make things better for everyone," Kenny says. "OQYS is by youth, for youth." ☐

Oregon Queer Youth Summit, Sat., May 14, 8:30 a.m.-5 p.m.; Portland State University, Smith Memorial Student Union, 1825 SW Broadway; free; register at oregonsafeschools.org.

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