

BLACK Beauty

continued ▲ from Front

sonal questions about sexuality, relationships, coming-out experiences, HIV and other topics fans are eager to get his input on.

"I get all these people telling me, 'I want to be like you,'" he said. "It's great to be a role model, but it was nothing I ever meant to be. At first I was scared, but it made me realize I had better be able to live what I'm talking."

Cook said his most important mentoring engagement is with Women's Intergroup AIDS Resource, a northeast Portland group that provides services for women with AIDS and their families.

Each year the group sponsors Camp Starlight, a week long summer camp for children aged five through 17 who are infected with AIDS or have been affected by AIDS. For the past two years, Cook has acted as a volunteer counselor at the camp.

"I know it sounds so Miss America, but it totally changed my

life," he said. "Going to camp with these kids really puts the whole world in perspective - and we have fun, too. It's not like we sit around and say, 'So, your mother's ill, huh?' and stuff like that. No, we have a blast!"

Camp Starlight brought Cook some personal introspection.

The realization came when Cook saw a 10-year-old boy with AIDS take 10 pills as big as thumb nails before breakfast. Cook said if that little boy could choke down those pills each day without complaining, he figured he should be able to better maintain a positive outlook on life.

"If that little boy can deal with this disease," Cook said. "I should be able to deal with my ex-boyfriend being a jerk."

After that defining moment, Cook vowed to quit worrying about negative things. He took stock of the good things in his life and eliminated the bad things, like recreational drugs and drinking too much.



PHOTOS BY WENDY DYER/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Dressed to the nines as "Poison Waters" in a sparkling dress with a neck of rhinestones, Kevin Cook shakes hands with an audience member. Cook tries to acknowledge all of his fans and runs a website where they can ask him for personal advice.

Now every time he makes a decision, Cook stops and asks if he would be embarrassed if a camper or their parents saw him.

Camp Starlight also caused him to slow down and spend some time thinking about where he came from and who he wanted to be.

Cook was born near Santa Monica, Calif. to an African American father and a Mexican-Indian mother. He said the family moved from "a multicultural middle-class melting pot of everything" to outer northeast Portland when he was 11. He and his sister were usually the only African Americans in his classes at Parkrose.

In high school, he excelled academically, socially and in extracurricular activities like band, choir and orchestra. But Cook said he always felt like there was something different about him. He had crushes on girls and went to the prom three times but said he never had romantic inclinations towards women.

"These days gay is everywhere," Cook said. "But at the time I thought I was the only one. I thought that no one else could be having these thoughts and feelings like mine. I had no direction and no role models."

Lost and alone, when Cook turned 18 he looked to Portland's under 21 gay community for help.

He found it at City Night Club, a now closed 18-and-older music and performance venue. It was there that Cook realized he wasn't the only one, and once he stepped out of the closet, it was like a breath of

fresh air. His family and friends accepted his sexuality without issue.

"I hear these terrible stories from kids about their parents disowning them," Cook said. "I never had to deal with that. To this day my mom still comes to my shows. Nobody ever had a problem with me, I had a problem with myself."

Strangely enough, Cook fixed that problem and found comfort with his identity by putting on a dress.

There was just something about the glitter and the glamour of drag that drew him in — the rhinestone sparkles, the dresses with feathers, the high-heeled shoes and the

able to appreciate the beauty."

On another night, Cook raised his hand when an African American drag queen by the name of Rosey Waters asked the audience if anyone would like to learn the ropes of becoming a drag queen performer.

"I wanted big hair and big jewelry," he said. "I wanted everyone to love me."

Rosey took him aside and they made a plan. They spent a Saturday afternoon putting on make-up.

He said Rosey would draw a line down the middle of his face, apply one side of pancake foundation, eye shadow, lipstick and rouge and he would try to recreate the look on

the other side. Then they would wash it off and start all over again.

The drag community took Cook in with open arms. Other drag queens lent him old shoes, clothing and feather boas and Poison Marie Waters was born.

The transition was all very natural for Cook, who said he never had any difficulty wearing pounds of

makeup or walking in 6-inch heels; What he had a problem with was stereotypes left over from 70s and 80s era drag culture that sometimes paint an inaccurate picture that all drag queens are sassy sisters with spitfire tongues.

"I don't understand why people have to say, 'Hey, bitch,' when they really just want to say, 'Hi, how are you?'" Cook said.

As Poison, Cook prefers to take the 'hi' road and be nice to everyone and assume everybody will be nice in return, regardless of his race, sexual orientation or the sequins he's wearing.

"I don't go around thinking, 'I want to find the racism here,' or, 'I want to find the homophobia here,'" Cook said. "I think, 'I want to find the beauty in this — or the positivity.'"

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— Kevin Cook, "Poison Waters" in Portland's drag community

Colgate smiles spoke to him.

Cook began envision himself in a dress when he saw his first group of African American female impersonators perform at City Night Club.

"The other drag queens repulsed and disgusted me," Cook said. "But these ladies really knew what they were doing. I was blown away — they looked like real women. I think it took seeing someone like me to be

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REACH

Racial & Ethnic Approaches to Community Health
A program of the African American Health Coalition, Inc.
Sponsored by the CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)

Wellness Within REACH: Mind, Body, and Soul Activity Calendar

	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat
Matt Dishman 77 NE Knott	Strength Training 8-9am and 2-3pm Brown		Strength Training 8-9am and 2-3pm Brown		Strength Training 8-9am and 2-3pm Brown Chicago Step 6:00-7:00pm Kendrick	African Dance 10:00-11:00am Addo
Salvation Army 5325 N Williams	Salsa 6:30-7:30pm Begin 3/3/03 Sign Up ASAP Haugland	Water Aerobics 2:00 - 3:00pm Hampton		Water Aerobics 2:00 - 3:00pm Hampton		
Nature's 3535 NE 15th		Yoga 7:30-8:30 pm O'Rourke		Yoga O'Rourke 7:45-8:45 pm (begins 3/27/03)		Body Conditioning 9:30-10:30am Nickerson
Peninsula Park 700 N Portland		Walking Group 6:00-7:00 pm Nickerson (Meet inside the Lloyd Center in front of Sears)				Walking Group 12:30 pm Nickerson
Mallory Avenue Christian Church (Gym) 126 NE Alberta	Aerobics 6:30-7:30pm Nickerson		Aerobics 6:30-7:30pm Nickerson		Aerobics 6:30-7:30pm Nickerson	
Highland United Church of Christ 4635 NE 9th Ave.	Aerobics 6:00-7:00am Pierce	Aerobics 6:00-7:00pm Keller	Aerobics 6:00-7:00am Pierce	Aerobics 6:00-7:00pm Keller		

**Must be 21 or older to participate. Please check with AAHC before showing up to the first class 503-413-1850. Please receive approval from your doctor before beginning exercise class.
All classes are free of charge!



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Windermere

Free HIV Testing in NE Portland

Tuesday and Thursday Evenings
5:00-8:00 p.m.

(last check in at 7:30 p.m.)

NE Health Center

MLK Jr. Blvd. And NE Killingsworth

(Enter in rear door near Emerson, go to 2nd floor)

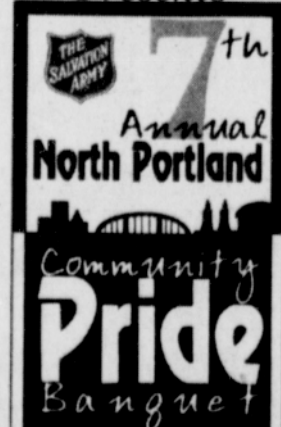
Se habla español los Martes

For more information on HIV and testing

Call the Oregon AIDS Hotline 1-800-777-AIDS

Multnomah County Health Department

Summit Construction Presents



Join Us!

As we honor those who have given of themselves to the North/Northeast Portland Area.

Tickets are available by calling The Salvation Army at (503) 493-3925.

Tuesday, March 18th 6:00 pm

2003 Community Pride Award Honorees:
Bernie & Bobbie Dorae Foster,
Assistant Chief Derrick Foxworth,
Debbie Hill, Tim Kennedy, Joe
McFerrin, and Bishop Adolph A. Wells
Moore Street Community Center
5335 N Williams Avenue