

NORTHWEST NEWS

SMYRC grows up: The youth center welcomes adults to new resources

By JENNY FURNISS

In the back of an unassuming office building off Martin Luther King, Jr. Blvd. and N.E. Morris, the Sexual Minority Youth Resource Center (SMYRC) occupies an office space bedecked with rainbow checkers and stripes. There's a homemade wooden stage, pool table, kitchen, salon, separate art room and garden—it's a teen's dream clubhouse.

Like a group of boisterous Labradors, the youth are laughing, talking, hopping around, happy. Other youth and staff are sitting on the floor of the art room painting a mural of Bayard Rustin, an openly gay civil rights activist who organized the 1963 March on Washington. His portrait will soon adorn the south wall of the building they've occupied since moving from SE Belmont last summer. Besides a break-in last month, which was not a hate crime and appeared to be committed by someone familiar with the center, their move to MLK has been a positive one.

For some of these teens, SMYRC is a snug cocoon on a winter night, the only space in which they are comfortable to be themselves. But, just as Wendy Darling once learned, everyone's gotta grow up sometime, and the same goes for SMYRC. The youth organization is expanding some of its resources to adults, throwing all-ages events and talking about what it feels like to become a grown up.

SMYRC is the only drop-in resource center in Oregon exclusively for queer and questioning youth, and it provides free counseling and supervised recreation. More than 1,000 youth visited SMYRC last year.

Now, SMYRC is offering counseling resources on a sliding scale to queer adults. This is a direct response to the closure of the Russell Street Counseling Center, which assisted a number of queer clients. Several of the counselors who worked at Russell Street will now be counseling in the SMYRC space.

"We decided to fill this void so the community wouldn't go into crisis," said SMYRC Director Favor Ellis. "We have the capacity and space and staff to provide counseling to everybody who identifies as LGBTQ youth and adults."

Other adult-oriented efforts, like so many things at SMYRC, are youth initiated.

"The moment you walk in as a youth, you have as much power as anyone else," said Grey Riviere, 22, about the egalitarian decision-making system, which has resulted in everything from a smoking ban to the Emerging Adult Program.

This group facilitates conversations about what growing out of the program will mean—once youth turn 24, they are no longer able to hang out in the drop-in space, though they can



Sunshine (left), a SMYRC staffer, and SMYRC visitor Teddy work on a mural of gay civil rights activist Bayard Rustin that will decorate the center's new location in NE Portland.


which provides workshops on issues faced by the queer community.

In March, the Community Education Project will begin training staff at the Douglas E. Long Juvenile Justice Center. In late spring, they will launch a statewide training for foster parents through the Department of Health and Human Services.

These efforts—the new location and expanded services and outreach—are the fruition of several years of perseverance, and dreams of Ellis since she became director in 2008.

"My biggest priority for SMYRC is that we're able to create a safe space for all LGBTQ youth within the com-

munity—meaning supporting adults and their care of youth," concluded Ellis. "The youth who go to SMYRC are going to grow up, and I want them to find a place where they're welcomed and celebrated in the way they are at SMYRC."

Growing up can be difficult, but with a childhood that includes the acceptance guiding SMYRC, at least they'll start their journey into adulthood on the right foot. 

Since the beginning of January, SMYRC has also lowered its age limit to 12, in response to preteens becoming aware of their gender identity at a younger age.

After receiving multiple calls from elementary schools, SMYRC broadened its efforts to reach out to teachers of a younger demographic through its Community Education Project,

still access certain services and are welcome to stop by and say hello.

"When a youth ages out of SMYRC it's kind of hard for them to jump into the older queer community," explained Lucas, 20. He's part of the Youth Events Council, which is trying to create more all-ages events.

SMYRC hosts its 100th open mic night from 7 to 10 p.m. March 26. For more information about SMYRC, visit smyrc.org or contact Ellis at 503-872-9664 ext. 1 or favor.ellis@cascadiabhc.org.