

# What young queers do behind closed doors

BY BEN MACLEAN

On a Tuesday evening in a downtown office building, a group of young gay and bisexual men gets together to do the unthinkable — discuss their lives and offer one another support.

At tonight's meeting of the men's half of the Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Youth Project, group members have brought with them food for a potluck. The meeting opens with a "check in" where individuals express both their reasons for hope and frustration. Across the street, young women meet as well, perhaps to watch a film or hold a group talk.

"What we try to do is make people feel comfortable," comments Aaron Wright, the community education facilitator for the Youth Project.

"People can be themselves, who they are."

"My personal goal more than anything else is to provide a safe haven for these guys and girls," adds Dash Riprock, a volunteer facilitator with the group.

The Youth Project is a relatively new resource in the Halifax area. What members refer to as an "easygoing" and "accepting" environment has only been in

existence since 1993, when Maura Donovan, a student at the Maritime School of Social Work, began the group under her field placement. Now the project includes both single-sex and mixed meetings.

Despite the presence of university groups such as the Bisexual, Gay, and Lesbian Association of Dalhousie (BGLAD), Wright feels the Youth Project is filling a void for those under 25.

"BGLAD is more of a social group," he states.

According to Wright, the Youth Project's crucial peer support component is what makes it different.

Averaging five to 10 people in attendance at each session, the Youth Project is helping some youth cope with what Wright defines as a "sense of isolation."

"A lot of activities in the [gay] community focus on the bar, which makes it hard to meet people if you are under 19," suggests one young woman.

While maintaining that "the core of the Youth Project is the youth groups," Wright also stresses the organization's wider achievements of raising awareness of homophobia and heterosexism.

Wright states that, "The continued role of the Youth Project

is one within the province of providing public education." To date, the group has completed over 400 workshops in high schools, universities, and even law firms.

Also on the provincial level, the Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Youth Project operates a telephone counselling line on Saturday evenings. Recently, however, this service has been put on hold due to a volunteer shortage.

Wright admits, "That will be a project that we're trying to reinvent."

Regardless, the group is committed to other initiatives, such as participating in the annual Halifax Pride March, and coordinating a camping retreat each summer to encourage youth from across the province to come out and meet others who are sharing their experiences.

In the way of challenges the collective is facing, ironically, the greatest obstacle has not been homophobic acts against the group, but rather a lack of funding. As it

stands, the project is dependant on meagre donations, fundraising, and honoraria.

Another hurdle to clear is getting word of the group's services out to those in need. Current publicity efforts include posters distributed citywide, and an Internet web site, but word of mouth continues to bring most people.

Despite the difficulties facing the group, Wright affirms, "There have been hundreds of people who have either come through our doors or who have contacted us for information." From its office shared with Planned Parenthood, the group has offered assistance to both youths and their parents, by mailing out information and referring individuals to gay-positive social workers and psychologists.

"If they want to come by and just access our office, they're free to do so," Wright stresses.

No matter what the complications facing the group are, the validity of the Youth Project remains obvious.

Despite the fact that Riprock believes the members "all seem to be coping really well," he sees that "sometimes people express some feelings of low self esteem and [of having problems] fitting in."

Ann O'Connor, another volunteer facilitator, presents the situation by saying, "The largest concern that most of our members have is coming out in a safe environment," stressing that the academic situation is often the most difficult.

According to group members, however, there is reason for optimism. One young man goes so far as to state, "The Youth Project helped me come to terms with who I am."

A female member says that, "Any reservations that you may have are worth putting aside to go to a meeting."

These reactions fit with Wright's definition of the Project.

"We want people to feel respected. They receive disrespect everywhere else."

(The LGBYP can be reached at 492-0444)

## Protesters march for wages

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"Hey-hey, ho-ho, administration has got to go."

A few minutes later they entered the A&A building and walked right down to the president's office. The hallway was packed with protesters shouting, "We want Tom! We want Tom!"

At that point about 12-15 protesters pushed themselves into Traves's office.

Traves did not look happy as the protester took turns asking him why Dalhousie would treat their teachers and students this way. They wanted Traves to negotiate an agreement right at that moment with them, but he would not commit to anything.

"We are continuing the negotiating process with the Union and it will be settled there," Traves said.

"We have certainly given Mr. Traves something to think about tonight," said Barbara Moore, president of CUPE local 3912. She came into Traves's office a few minutes after they took control of it and asked her fellow protesters to leave his office and join her down by the Killiam library.

Michelle Gallant, Dalhousie's public relations director, described the surprise she felt by the students action.

"It certainly wasn't expected, let me put it that way. But obviously that group feels concerned about this situation and wanted to express themselves in this way," Gallant said.

Gallant described Dalhousie's position on the stalled talks.

"The negotiations with CUPE have not been active for some time. We are interested and willing to go back to the table, but what is key right

now is for them to be willing to consider other alternative proposals," Gallant said.

Earle feels that the Dalhousie administration is going to feel pressure from a number of fronts as a consequence of not negotiating with the union.

"As long as they keep paying people starvation wages, the pressure is really going to build up on the [Dalhousie] administration from everyone," Earle added.

Pat Harding, a Biology teacher at Dalhousie, attended the rally and shared her thoughts about Dalhousie's treatment of part-time instructors and TAs.

"I really feel very strongly about this because I don't like being part of an institution that has first-class and second-class citizens. They work just as hard and are equally qualified and get paid 25 per cent of what a full-time faculty member does," Harding said.

Sarah Emsley is a part-time instructor at Dalhousie. She teaches one English course with 55 students in the class. Emsley related a personal struggle she is facing.

"We're only allowed to teach one course, and for that we receive \$5,187 before taxes with no benefits," Emsley said. "Because [I teach one course] I'm not eligible for employment insurance during the summer, or even a student job. I am on interest relief and have been the entire time since I finished school. I taught at Dalhousie last year and this year and I have been only able to make two payments on my student loan."

Emsley is frustrated with the current situation at Dalhousie.

"It was Dalhousie that educated me

and they respect my education in that they're willing to employ me. But they don't think my education is worth enough to pay me a living wage."

Among the protesters were three Dalhousie TAs — Kirk Whalen, Mark MacLean and Gordon MacPherson, who had this to say when asked why they were marching in this protest.

"In Biology, we are given scholarships so we're not allowed to work outside the university. So we have to become TAs just to cover our necessary needs. But not all departments work like that and each one is different," Whalen said.

Each individual department at Dalhousie is different in structure and each department makes different arrangements for each individual student.

"We are given poverty [amounts of money] as graduate students. We have to become TAs to supplement the lack of money we are given," MacPherson said.

"We're not allowed to have any other jobs, we're only supposed to work eight hours a week, but we work many more than that," MacLean added.

Dalhousie is trying to work out a formula that will average TA pay giving raises to certain departments and cutting others significantly. The TAs are demanding a pay raise from \$8-9 to \$15-20 per hour.

The protest was a last effort to get the universities to listen before the strike vote.

Once assembled in front of the library, some students and professors stopped to hear what was being said by speakers representing various groups. But their overall message was clear in the actions they took, the signs they carried and the slogans they shouted: "Fairness is not a lot to ask for."

## Panhandling by-law



Flick flick: A fixture outside of Clyde Street liquor store. (Photo by Matt Barrie)

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Koehler does admit that this type of job can only do so much good.

"Our paper can't support all the people that need support."

*Street Feat* is published once a month and the sales tend to dwindle after the first couple of weeks. Not only that, but they cannot provide a source of income for all those who need it.

The question of lack of funds also introduces another problem for the by-law. Smillie says that this is "an issue much greater than

enforcement," as there would be difficulties with penalising for any infractions. Fines are not a possibility, as most panhandlers would not be able to pay them. Those violating the by-law would likely be relocated from the prohibited area.

Koehler is doubtful that this type of by-law would be successful. She adds that this is something all citizens need to concern themselves with.

"Sometimes losing everything is not [the person's] fault."

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