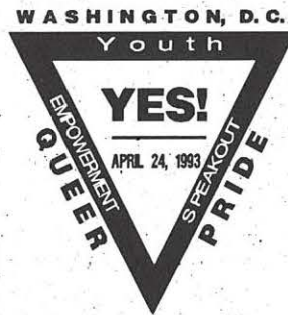


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Report on the First Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Transgender Youth Empowerment Speakout



BRIDGES PROJECT · AMERICAN FRIENDS SERVICE COMMITTEE
1501 Cherry Street, Philadelphia, PA 19102 • (215) 241-7133



Dear friends,

I am writing to share with you an exciting report on the first national gathering organized for and by lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth and youth service providers. The word *empowerment* is often used when speaking of disenfranchised communities. In recent years it has become almost required to include the word *empowerment* when talking of youth issues. However, rarely is the full meaning of the word *empowerment* analyzed or at times understood. Webster's Collegiate Dictionary defines the word *empower* as to give official authority or legal power to. The organizers of the 1993 Youth Empowerment Speakout realized that true empowerment is the active commitment to enabling affected communities to speak for themselves.

Often ignored, abused, exploited, or forgotten about, LGBT youth face enormous obstacles and rejection in many areas of their lives. Recent studies and reports have revealed some of these obstacles. A disproportionate number are at high risk for HIV infection¹ and AIDS, physical and/or sexual abuse², alcohol and drug abuse³, homelessness⁴, and suicide⁵. Often invisible or seen as going through a phase, the difficulties of LGBT youths are exacerbated by isolation and neglect. Those seeking to support LGBT youths face lack of sufficient resources, up to date information, and knowledge of similar programs. Addressing these problems requires multifaceted approaches, particularly accurate information and services sensitive to racial and ethnic identity.

This report documents an incredible example of a grassroots national commitment to hearing and addressing the needs and concerns of LGBT youth. No one group or individual was singularly responsible for making

the 1993 Youth Empowerment Speakout (YES) a reality. Only by struggling together were organizers able to effectively bring together LGBT youth and youth supporters from around the country. The result was that on April 24 and 25, 1993, over 2,000 youths gathered to share their joys, frustrations, and visions of new possibilities. It is a testament to the hope and belief that change, while elusive, is feasible.

Whether you are a representative from a national youth organization or a national gay and lesbian organization, a youth, a youth-services provider, a clergy member, a parent, a member of Congress, an educator, or a concerned adult, this report is for you.

Jenie Hall
Bridges Project

¹*Centers for Disease Control, 1992.*

²*Hunter, J., "Violence Against Lesbian and Gay Male Youths," J. Interpersonal Violence, 5(3) September 1990.*

³*Ramafedi, "Adolescent Homosexuality," Clinical Pediatrics, 24(9):481-485, 1985.*

⁴*Seattle Commission on Children and Youth, Seattle, Wash., Report on Gay & Lesbian Youth in Seattle, p. 13, November 1988.*

⁵*Gibson, Paul, "Gay Male and Lesbian Youth Suicide," Report of the Secretary's Task Force on Youth Suicide (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, January 1989), pp. 110-142.*

Report and Remarks on the Youth Empowerment Speakout

PROLOGUE

Hoping to raise the level of debate on gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth issues, the following is a report on the first national speaking event organized for and by gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth. The Youth Empowerment Speakout (YES) occurred April 24, 1993, in Washington, D.C., and attracted over 600 participants from around the United States.

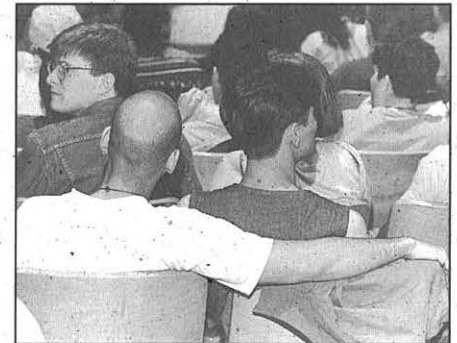
This paper, prepared by YES organizers, includes youth quotes, insights, and general demographic information gathered from YES. It is a synopsis of insights on change from those youths and youth-service providers who attended.

Nationally in the movement for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender civil rights, a serious discussion of youth issues has been gravely lacking. Increasingly targeted by religious supremacists and ignored by the larger gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender communities, youth issues now, more than ever, need national leadership and recognition. Included in this report are thoughtful responses and steps that readers are encouraged to take to address gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth issues.

A WEEKEND OF YOUTH EMPOWERMENT

The Youth Empowerment Speakout (YES) occurred during the weekend of the National March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay, and Bi Equal Rights, and Liberation. Culminating in a large youth contingent at the march, YES was a combination of activities designed to empower gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth. Throughout the weekend of April 23-25, youths were encouraged to identify priority issues and address the institutions affecting their everyday lives. YES and related events attracted almost 2,000 youth.

The main event of YES was the Speakout itself, a networking and brainstorming intensive held on Saturday, April 24, on Capitol Hill. As the first national speaking



'We're tired of the cold shoulder; we're tired of being dismissed; we're tired of being treated like bundles of raging hormones with no ideas! Stop bullying us and complaining about us long enough to listen, for a change!'

event put together for, of, and by gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth, it attracted almost 600 women and men ages 14 through 24 and was the largest such gathering ever held.

On arriving, participants were given free t-shirts, condoms, books, stickers, and information packets. Included in the packets were information cards that would provide a general demographic picture of YES. (See graphs at the end of this report.)

YES consisted of an opening plenary session with presentations on four issue areas (safety, education, diversity, and religion/politics), opportunities for participants to meet in small discussion/action groups, and an open-microphone session.

Other youth-related activities surrounding YES included a youth issues briefing during the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force/Human Rights Campaign Fund/AIDS Action Council Lobby Days, fund-raisers, a meeting of youth organizers and service providers, and youth representation at the march.

After the Speakout, an alcohol and drug-free dance was held for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth 24 and under. It was the only specific youth social event provided during the weekend of the march.

The following day a youth contingent of over 1,500 strode behind the YES banner. Marching sixth in the March On Washington, the group sang and chanted proudly along the entire march route. The largest youth contingent ever in such a march, the youths and supporters made sure that their presence was known through chants such as "Hey, Hey, Ho, Ho; Ageism has got to Go!" and "2,4,6,8; are you sure your kids are straight?!"

All YES events were sign-interpreted and physically accessible.

YES: BRIEF HISTORY

The ideas and work behind YES developed at the 1992 National Gay and Lesbian Health Foundation Conference. During the conference, a number of youth service providers and organizers came together to discuss youth events and resources at the 1993 March on Washington. After considerable discussion, the group agreed to sponsor and organize a Youth Empowerment Speakout and host a youth social event.

The leading priority for organizers was ensuring that youth be involved in the planning process and that activities of YES be youth-driven. Other priorities included making the events youth-safe and drug/alcohol-free. The initial group noted that no

other youth events were being planned for the march and felt that it was important for YES not to duplicate or infringe on any other youth events. The organizers viewed YES as needing to be a focused, national event of, by, and for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth at which resources and information from around the country would be available for them.

Representatives from the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) coordinated two sets of conference calls. One, led by Karina Luboff, an AFSC intern from Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington, involved a group of youths who actually organized the agenda of events and staffed the sessions. The other, chaired by Jenie Hall, director of AFSC's Bridges Project, was a group of youth service providers and organizers who worked together to coordinate logistics and resources. With the sponsorship of the Foundation for National Progress, Luke Adams signed on as the site-based organizer for YES and worked out of the offices of the D.C.-based Sexual Minority Youth Assistance League. The League's president, Board, staff, and volunteers provided invaluable assistance.

A listing of organizing and sponsoring agencies follows this report.

THE SPEAKOUT ISSUE AREAS

The Saturday Speakout began with a plenary session during which facilitators of four issues groups briefly introduced their topics. YES participants were then invited to break into smaller discussion/action groups or stay for an open microphone session. The issue areas, decided by the youth steering committee, were as follows:

Area	Facilitator	Speaker
Safety	Todd Taylor	(See Below) ¹
Diversity	Yvette Gomez	Yvette Gomez
Religion and Politics	Doug Yount	Mei Klomp
Education	Rick Aguirre	Mary Hansen
Open Microphones	Karina Luboff and Noel Talavera	
Service-Providers ²	Jenie Hall	



¹ One facilitator could not be named because representatives of the media were present, and she is subject to deportation for political reasons having to do with her family and because her sexual orientation is illegal in her native country.

² The service-providers and adult supporters also met briefly during the small groups sessions.



The master of ceremonies was Noel Talavera, who seemed to catch the mood of the gathering by saying, "We're tired of the cold shoulder; we're tired of being dismissed; we're tired of being treated like bundles of raging hormones with no ideas! Stop bullying us and complaining about us long enough to listen for a change!" Noel then went on to introduce Nina Terrell who presented an historical overview of the processes and events that led up to the Youth Empowerment Speakout and the beginnings of a gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth movement.

Most of the following discussion group descriptions were prepared by the youth who facilitated them.

SAFETY

The group opened with the sharing of names and important networking information. Todd and the speaker outlined the issue of safety as including both physical and mental safety. For the most part, participants felt that areas separate for youth and exclusive of adults were only necessary in cases where the threat of violence or abuse was present. Instead, they advocated for youth-friendly environments that would not prevent youth from attending because of age. (Many youth felt isolated from the adult lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender movement because of a lack of social events outside of bars or away from alcohol.) Other youths also voiced a desire to feel respected, heard, and safe from being "hit on" when they interacted with older leaders or associates.

Considerable discussion ensued about HIV/AIDS safer sex practices and the need for more explicit education and resources. Because it was felt that this issue would demand too much time, it was saved for a larger discussion with other youths from the plenary session who had already begun talking about it.

The women in the group initiated a discussion about lesbian health issues. They called for greater lesbian health care awareness and education, specifically directed at young women. Overall, there was a strong desire expressed for more lesbian health awareness and education among young lesbians. Breast exams were discussed, as well as the use of dental dams for oral sex. The women indicated that dental dam use was uncommon. They shared what they knew and were unhappy that they did not know more.

There was some discussion of sensitivity between women and men and concern about the safety of a dialogue between them. Most of the women felt that young gay and bisexual men had little sensitivity to women's concerns. There were discussions from both women and men about the ideology of rape and some disagreements about what sorts of violence are rape. All agreed that they needed more work and education together.

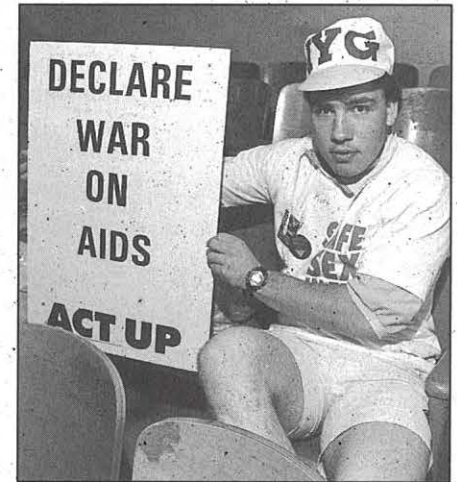
To lessen the feeling of isolation, suicide and substance abuse issues dominated most of the safety group discussion. The prevalence of substance abuse among gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth was attributed to the great degree of social pressure and the lack of support all around. Alcohol and drugs are an escape for many, it was felt. Participants also discussed the greater sexual risks involved when people are intoxicated. One extremely frightening moment occurred when it was discovered that all of the youth in the safety discussion group had considered suicide at some time in their lives.

The group called for greater national support from the Lesbian and Gay Movement, especially from older leaders, and wider, more intense, and more direct health education.

RELIGION & POLITICS

The religion and politics discussion group was one of the most heavily attended sessions of YES. The participants of this workshop discussed the dual relationship religion and politics can have on gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth. Almost immediately the group focused on how religion affects politics and on the impact the two issues have on society in the United States. Among the questions posed were: "What role, if any, does religion play in the political agenda of the United States? Is that role inevitable?" "What process can be used to separate the role of morals in society from the mandates exposed in religious dogma?"

The participants in the group were all youths from 16 to 24, from racially, socially, politically, and spiritually diverse backgrounds. However, the one aspect on which everyone could agree was that, whether it should or not, religion plays a tremendous role in American politics. Most participants agreed that politics must pull away from its love affair with the religious concept of good and evil. The moral basis of the country



'If just one counselor or teacher or someone had stood up for me then it might not have been so bad. ... As it was, I'm glad I had the few friends I did to help me through.'

should instead focus more on the rights of privacy with laws based on reason and factual information rather than on concepts of sin.

Patrick, a youth from Colorado, impressed upon the group the serious threat posed by the religious right to issues important to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth. He spoke of the tactics used by the religious groups in Colorado to get Amendment 2 passed. He stressed the rise in hate crimes and the increased fear among people who are now afraid of coming out or being found out. The youth group from Colorado urged everyone to get involved and not to ignore the issue. "It was our apathy—our belief that no one would ever vote to pass such a bill—that allowed it to pass," said one youth. "Don't let the same thing happen in your state."

A vigorous debate then erupted over the effectiveness and necessity to boycott Colorado. Most participants from that state seemed opposed to the boycott. "You are hurting the wrong people," Patrick stated. "You are financially damaging the people in major cities such as Denver and Boulder, which have anti-discrimination laws on the books for homosexuals. Those people voted against Amendment 2. Meanwhile, the people who voted for the amendment are out in the suburbs and rural areas, and they are not being affected because tourism is down. They are glad to see the faggots and their money stay out of the state." Other youth agreed, feeling that instead of boycotting the state, we should be flooding it with homosexual presence. "We can't let them think they can just run us out of there," stated one participant. "If they think they can do it there, they'll try it everywhere else, too." Several youth from across the country warned that efforts are being attempted by religious groups to put similar amendments on the ballots in at least eight other states.

EDUCATION

The education issues group consisted of approximately 25 people. The majority of participants felt that ignorance was the basis of many of the issues faced by gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth. The group advocated that education and awareness of sexual minorities must begin at an early age and then continue throughout high school. Educators and administrators especially must be made aware of and informed of queer issues. A few youths shared painful experiences of being labeled gay or lesbian in school. One 18-year-old stated:

If just one counselor or teacher or someone had stood up for me then it might not have been so bad. ... As it was, I'm glad I had the few friends I did to help me through.

There was also much discussion about college support and social groups. Many participants spoke about their positive experiences in such groups. Other people came from smaller or more conservative schools and wanted to know how to get such groups going at their schools. Many different suggestions were shared on how to start support and social groups, including: getting the word out, having strong leadership and/or faculty assistance, securing funding, having a clear purpose and goals, and maintaining confidentiality.

Another suggestion was to encourage graduates to return to their high schools and share their experiences of growing up lesbian or gay there. The graduates could then talk about the benefits a support group would have given them and ask the school to start such a group. If the school still didn't feel comfortable with starting a support group, graduates could offer to be a speaker on gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender issues to help inform students about these subjects. As Doug Yount, the group facilitator put it:

Education goes beyond support and understanding among gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth and includes being visible and open to non-gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth.

An often repeated sentiment in the group addressed the need for action:

"Be visible."

"Talk about being gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender."

"Put signs up on campus."

"Tell your friends about your experiences."

"Chalk graffiti."

"Write letters to newspapers."

"Respond to homophobic remarks, and when signs are torn down and ears are covered and letters go unprinted, don't give up but, rather, triple your efforts."

"No matter what, do something."

'HIV and AIDS wasn't even mentioned as an issue area.... young people die because of this kind of denial or lack of attention!'



DIVERSITY

The diversity workshop was attended by approximately 15 very diverse young people. As with any discussion dealing with such a broad topic, participants began by trying to define what diversity meant to them. It was important that the group not only share individual definitions, but also that they work to agree on a common definition of diversity.

After the group defined what diversity meant to individuals, they talked about how diverse we all are within ourselves. Surprisingly people who said or thought diversity was not something that included them or that there was nothing diverse about them, eventually had much to say about the diversity within themselves.

The group successfully completed the first and probably most important step in diversity awareness: By helping people realize that being committed to diversity means that all of who they are should be included in everything they do. From there the participants went on to talk about how diversity fits into the youth movement.

Everyone agreed that many different kinds of people should be visible in the youth movement and important to it. People came into the group with a great awareness of the importance of diversity; they left with an even stronger sense of that and the knowledge that they're not alone. Overall the discussion was exciting, honest, and empowering.

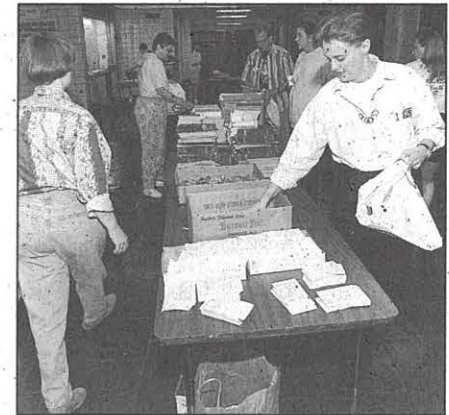
OPEN MICROPHONE

The open microphone session provided the most direct and the most troubling information of the Speakout. Speakers called for greater unity, and several young people spoke about general issues of concern, such as recognition, educational needs, social support services, and more sensitivity to people with disabilities. However, the overriding concern was HIV infection and AIDS among gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth.

Several participants called for greater visibility, reduction of risks, education about safer sex, medical and mental health care, and youth access to insurance and social support services. One of the speakers, Pedro Zamora, was particularly concerned that the workshops selected by organizers did not include one specifically on youth and AIDS.

In moving and powerful testimony, many young people approached the microphone to address the concern of youth and AIDS, including several, like Zamora, who shared their own experiences and struggles, living with HIV. With regard to AIDS, it is clear that our health care system, mainstream youth service agencies, and the national lesbian and gay movement continue to neglect the needs of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth population. "Too many days," Zamora told the group, "I feel like another step gets added every time I've climbed what I thought was the last."

Another youth said, "I regret that the open microphone session occurred at a time when many of the participants were attending other workshops, so relatively few were able to hear and respond to the concerns being raised. Even though they only reached a fraction of YES participants, the power and importance of their message ultimately spread through the whole Speakout, and the message was heard by everyone."



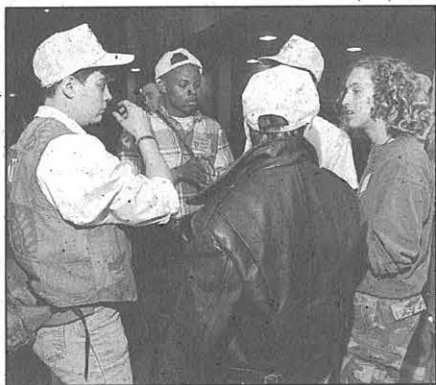
SERVICE-PROVIDERS/ADULT SUPPORTERS

A group of adult supporters and service-providers met while the young people held smaller group discussions and an open microphone session. The more than 40 adults briefly introduced themselves and shared information on current projects.

Highlights included:

- Presentation by Gay Phillips, of the National Resource Center for Youth Services, on current organizing of a national gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender youth conference in 1994 for youth and youth service-providers, building on the Speakout.
- Description by Francis Kunruether of the Hetrick-Martin Institute on the formation of the National Advocacy Council On Youth and Sexual Orientation;
- Call by Laurie Bell of the Lyon-Martin Women's Health Center for a fully-funded, structured national network of service-providers and youth working with gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth issues;

Some of the service providers expressed frustration with the amount of bicoastal networking that leaves the Midwest and South one step behind on issues of



national importance. Everyone present agreed that more networking between rural and urban programs needs to take place and that there are some serious differences between urban and rural programs.

THE CONTEXT: HISTORY AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Organizing to meet the needs of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth has been increasing since the late 1970s. Currently, there are a handful of national youth-serving organizations across the country to which many smaller such organizations look for assistance on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth. Two groups, the National Resource Center for Youth Services at the University of Oklahoma and the AFSC Bridges Project, provide resource-sharing and networking services for thousands of organizations and support groups across the country. The National Resource Center focuses on sensitivity training in mainstream organizations, while the Bridges Project offers technical assistance and information sharing. There is a tremendous need for collaborative, long-term efforts to continue and expand such work.

Increasingly, issues involving gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth are primary targets of religious supremacists and the extreme Right. Recent statewide ballot-initiatives to pass anti-gay legislation in such states as Oregon and Colorado have been marked by campaigns that try to link the gay community with pedophilia and bestiality. Focusing on schools and children, the Right has successfully targeted school boards from small towns in Oregon to large cities such as New York City. Kelly Walton, the vice-chairperson of the Oregon Citizens Alliance (backers of the anti-gay initiative), openly stated, "Oregon's initiative could have passed by over 60 percent if we would have included wording about keeping lessons about homosexuality out of the schools." Targeting schools and sponsoring anti-gay legislation, the Right's inflammatory language and actions further isolate and confuse lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth in need of support.

Leaders of the national gay and lesbian movement have been afraid to address youth issues. That hesitancy and silence has compounded the struggles of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth and effectively allowed the Right to dictate youths' choices. Without a strong national commitment to youth issues from the gay and lesbian movement's major organizations, it is difficult for youth organizers and service provid-

ers to present the realities of these young people to the public. Thus, most people in the United States remain decidedly ill-informed. John Hale, a legal consultant for the Archdiocese of New York, used this tactic to attack programs for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth in the June 13 *New York Times*: "This is extremely destructive,... [T]hey are willing to put at risk the other 99 percent of [youth] by encouraging them to experiment in their formative stages of adolescence. If a man in his early 30s invited the neighborhood children over to tell them about their sexual options, parents would call the cops; ...[they are] proselytizing."

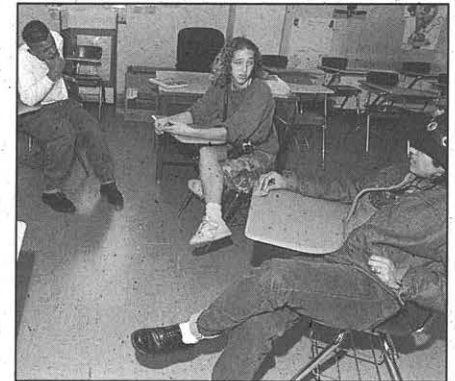
In the prepared text of his speech for the March On Washington, Troix Bettencourt, a youth representative from Boston's Proud, Inc., stated: "We need to get beyond our own fears of being called pedophiles... We need to get over our fear of reliving our own troubled adolescences and accept responsibility: to be out, to be role models, to be mentors, to change laws and fund youth programs, to offer our homes, to offer jobs, to offer our serious attention to the ideas of youth, to offer our experience and strength and our failings and weaknesses."

The lesbian and gay movement needs to put youth issues on the front line of local and national policy advocacy. The major national work in this area has come from organizations outside the movement. Sexual minority youth are disproportionately affected by grave social problems. The core of the youth agenda as repeatedly voiced at YES includes: suicide prevention, safe schools, AIDS education, and the development of leadership. A chief aim of the movement must be to put power into the hands of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth so that they may shape and move the institutions that affect their everyday lives according to their own visions.

CONCLUSION

With the rise and increased visibility of an active lesbian and gay movement, the time for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth to be heard has arrived. "As the adult members of the communities achieve the greatest social and political influence ever," Bettencourt told YES organizers, "it is time to respond to the voices and concerns of the younger members, or lose them."

Clearly, however, national organizations have ignored the immediate needs and contributions of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth. "What did the Human



Comments about YES included:

Great!! When is the next one?

Participant from New York

I loved it. It gave me a sense of empowerment.

Participant from Colorado

The teenagers were hype! They believed in what was so eloquently said by all who spoke!

...It was honest, it was great!!

Participant from Indiana

It's about time that youth voices are heard!!!

Participant from Florida

I felt better about myself just seeing so many queer youth together.

Region unknown

Rights Champagne Fund ever do for me?" Madelena Vallejo-Torres, 17, from Austin, Texas, commented as several Human Rights Campaign Fund signs were carried past the youth contingent: "I'm the brown baby-dyke from the wrong side of the tracks that none of the old boys in tuxes wanted to get near, let alone have to listen to."

In a land of abundance, resources are at a minimum to address the two greatest pandemics facing the youth of our country: suicide and AIDS. Sexual minority youth cut across all lines of region, race, class, religious or political affiliation, and ethnic heritage, and are profoundly and disproportionately burdened by these scourges. In a society that boasts about family values, young people and families bear the brunt of social intolerance, bureaucratic gridlock, and government inaction.

Both on the federal and local level, government agencies must be changed to support the lesbian and gay movement in empowering gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth. Government must be held accountable for its negligent treatment of these young people. While initially thought promising, the current national administration seems to offer little hope of facilitating progress. Measures that increase young people's sense of self-esteem and sense of responsibility must be implemented now, including satisfying the recommendations of the 1989 *Report of the Secretary's Task Force on Youth Suicide*, by the Department of Health and Human Services.

Those in organizational leadership positions nationally and locally can no longer shut out the sentiments expressed at YES by gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth. Sexual minority youth deserve to be heard and respected, both within the lesbian and gay movement and in society at large.

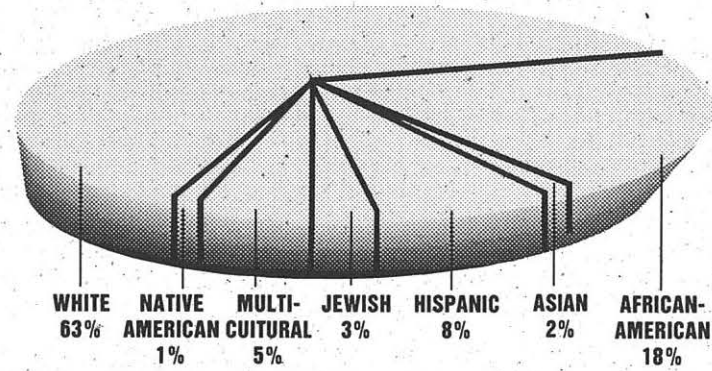
Action Agenda

- Staff and support existing national gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth advocacy and education efforts—and initiate additional efforts.
- Offer personal or financial assistance to developing and existing youth programs.
- Actively sponsor and include gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth in leadership positions such as on boards of directors, commissions, and in staff positions.

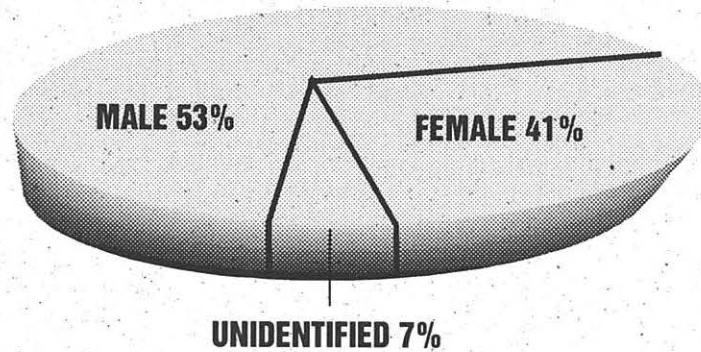
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- Help youth leaders to become economically empowered.
 - Offer services and events that are accessible to youth.
 - Listen to youth!

**'What did the Human Rights
Champagne Fund ever do for
me?... I'm the brown baby-dyke
from the wrong side of the
tracks that none of the old boys
in tuxes wanted to get near, let
alone have to listen to.'**

Ethnic Breakdown of YES



Gender Breakdown of YES



The American Friends Service Committee is a Quaker organization devoted to building a just and peaceful world. The AFSC's work reflects the beliefs of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers). Women and men of many races, nationalities, and religious backgrounds participate in AFSC as staff and committee members. All are united in their belief in the infinite worth and equality of each human being. This belief leads the AFSC to search for creative ways to challenge injustice and war. In communities throughout the country, AFSC works with people to bring an end to poverty, exclusion, and denial of recognition and rights.

*Photos by Terry Foss, AFSC staff.
Booklet design by Gerry Henry, AFSC staff.*



AMERICAN FRIENDS SERVICE COMMITTEE

National Office:

1501 Cherry Street, Philadelphia, PA 19102

AFSC Regional Offices:

- **Southeast Region** 92 Piedmont Avenue, NE, Atlanta, GA 30303
- **Middle Atlantic Region** 4806 York Road, Baltimore, MD 21212
- **New England Region** 2161 Massachusetts Avenue, Cambridge, MA 02140
- **Great Lakes Region** 59 E. Van Buren Street, Suite 1400, Chicago, ILL 60605
- **North Central Region** 4211 Grand Avenue, Des Moines, IA 50312
- **New York, Metropolitan Region** 15 Rutherford Place, New York, NY 10003
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- **Pacific Northwest Region** 814 N.E. 40th Street, Seattle, WA 98105
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