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Youth Gather to Address Bullying and Harassment in San Fernando Valley Schools

Students representing more than 25 San Fernando Valley Schools will meet this weekend for Gay-Straight Alliance Summit

Students from schools across the San Fernando Valley will gather for the first time for a Gay-Straight Alliance Leadership Summit. The summit will be held at the Metropolitan Community Church of the Valley located in North Hollywood and will hold peer to peer workshops to discuss the challenges at their schools. This unique gathering, is organized by the GSA Network, a youth leadership organization, to counter harassment and discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) and straight ally youth.

Image

Amanda Robles, a student trainer at the first Gay-Straight Alliance Leadership Summit in the San Fernando Valley and President of Granada Hills High School GSA Network club, and Daniel Solis, an organizer of the Summit. *Photo by Alex Garcia, San Fernando Valley Sun*

"The goal is to create safer schools," said program coordinator Daniel Solis, who is an organizer of the summit. Solis whose family is originally from El Salvador said he started a GSA Network club in 1999, when he was a high school student at Valley Alternative Magnet High School in Van Nuys. His younger brother Giovanni, who happens to be heterosexual, later took the reins to run the club at the school.

"It's easier to dismiss these issues when you don't know anyone, I think once you've made a personal connection with someone who is lesbian, gay or transgender it's a lot harder to dismiss it."

Solis said he and his brother are both politically driven.

"He is very passionate and he got the connection between struggle for the civil rights for justice for other people including Latinos, immigrants or LGBT students. For me too, LGBT issues are one of the most important issues I care about but not the only issues I care about."

Solis said he came out to his younger brother first who was accepting and later to the rest of his family who struggled with the news initially but all came around to be supportive. And after attending college in Ohio, Solis started working for the Gay-Straight Alliance network.

On Saturday, high school students, trained by GSA, the Gay- Straight Alliance Network will lead

the workshops on subjects ranging from successfully managing a student GSA club on their campus to sharing information on legal rights to planning and launching educational campaigns at schools.

One of those high school students whowill be acting as a student trainer is Amanda Robbins, a 17- yearold student from Granada Hills High School. Robbins is currently President of the GSA Network club on her high school campus.

"I'm looking forward to meeting new people and encouraging them. When I first started with the GSA Network, the trainers really inspired me to get more involved and getting involved has been one of the best things that I've done and hopefully I can now be that person for someone else."

While issues can vary across campuses, a common thread is harassment and the slurs that are common place and used everyday as part of casual conversation, said Solis, who said that during the legal workshop part of the summit, they inform students about legal rights issues and students learn that these slurs are illegal.

"It's illegal for someone to say, "That's so Gay" even if it's not directed to you and students are always surprised to hear that it's illegal under California law AB537? The Student and Safety Violence and Prevention Act of 2000," he said.

"It doesn't censor people who have an opinion, for example, someone who had a conservative background and believed it was morally wrong for people of same sex to get married, this law doesn't censor that opinion but it prevents someone who takes that belief and attacks a student, harassing them and making it hard for them to learn [by using slurs], "Solis explains.

Using the slur, "That's so Gay" can prevent someone from learning, maintains Solis.

"When every time someone doesn't like something, they say 'That's so Gay' or 'No Homo' and equates something they don't like with being gay, and you start internalizing that and think there is something wrong with you and there is that kind of implicit message that goes out and there is an explicit message in our homes and communities and churches and on TV that tell us it's not ok to be gay, or you're not normal, or that being gay [or LGBT] isn't common."

Robin experiences what Solis describes every day and agrees with him. She said she knows what it's like firsthand to sit in a classroomor walk through the hallway and hear slurs and it's worse when the slur is condoned.

"It's a big deal, because when the student uses slurs and the teachers don't say anything, it makes it ok, they have no punishment and when a teacher uses a slur it automatically changes the atmosphere in the room and everyone starts laughing and saying things and that changes the entire atmosphere and the feeling of the class, "said Robin.

She says when slurs aren't addressed it can give the green light for the slurs to continue and makes it very uneasy in the classroom.

"It makes it really uncomfortable because you are seeing all of your friends or people you think

are your friends and your classmates laughing and saying things that really affect and you feel unsafe and you're the only one not laughing or saying anything and you are that 'one kid.'"

Robin said it's especially difficult for a student who has publically "come out" to place the min a tough situation to be the lone advocate.

"It makes it awkward when everyone looks for your reaction then you become the person that has to argue about everything that is being said."

When slurs are condoned it sends a message said Robin that can cause fear not just for gay students but for all students who want to be supportive. She said people need to understand why they shouldn't be using slurs.

Robins, like Solis is fortunate to have the support of her family and came out around the time of the Prop 8 election last November. "My parents definitely are learning and support me. I always knew I liked girls, but didn't know that I didn't like guys. As I got older, I thought this was something I should say something about. It wasn't something that I just woke up and decided."

LGBT students have to consider issues, said Robin that other students don't have to worry about.

"Not all students have to think about things like how can I tell my parents, how is this going to change my life or at my school .. or just to having a simple relationship which a lot of kids have in high school with no problems," she shared.

Safety is amajor issue that will be addressed at the summit. While there are schools that Solis described that accept gay students and examples where they are the popular students, elected to the student body or even voted as prom queen, there are many more examples of harassment and bullying. Solis said here was a case at Birmingham High where slurs weere written.

defacing a student's locker with the words, 'we want you to die.

Image

SGA Summit held in San Gabriel. This weekend's summit is the first held in the San Fernando Valley.

"I think if you go to to any campus, no matter how progressive or liberal the school is, or what the racial makeup is, you would find bullying of all kinds and harassment of all kinds but specifically around LGBT issues. For the last 40 years, boys have used the term "Fag" or "You're Gay" to control each other tomake sure that they are acting like "Men." Straight men attack each other with these words and harass each other, even when they aren't targeting anyone who is gay."

"I've gotten to the point where I don't take every one of them [slurs] personally, said Robin, "But it still sets a certain environment and affects my comfort level and still bothers me and it shouldn't be at school and changes the atmosphere at school."

Solis said holding the GSA summit in their own community, will give students who attend whether they are gay or straight, the tools and leadership training they can use to make change on their campus.

He acknowledged that these kind of nuts and bolts workshops that include organizational skills, role playing, legal workshops and leadership training is usually reserved for college rather than high school students.

"Students, especially at lower income or low performing schools usually don't get leadership skills workshops. While many students may get these skills in college, many students aren't collegebound and they aren't going to go to college and it's important that all students get these skills as soon as they can, because while some of them do go to college, they can use these skills now in high school to make change immediately. We aren't training these students for the future, we are training them now, we believe they are leaders now and have work to do in their schools now."

Solis considers the issues as challenging at lots of schools.

"They may be different at Calabasas High rather than San Fernando High so we have to be creative and find out what the issues are and work with the students and really try to help them and not assume that the issues are the same everywhere. But harassment issues are the common thread that all LGBT students face," he said.

"We want to connect them with other clubs on other school campuses whether it's connecting students at the San Fernando High club with the club at Kennedy High in Granada Hills or connecting them with other resources in the San Fernando valley including the Metropolitan Church in North Hollywood or Benestar a group that helps LGBT youth an organization based in Van Nuys, so that they know what's out there in their community so that they don't have to go toWest Hollywood to get support if they need it."

"This leadership summit is for everyone including straight allies with the goal to educate and make lasting changes at their school and to also encourage training for school administrators," said Solis.

"It's really important for all students to be educated but also for teachers to stand up and if you hear a slur in class to stop and take that 5 minutes to talk about what was said so that student won't say that again and it won't happen in class again," said Robin.

For more information about the summit or the GSA Network, contact Daniel Solis, GSA Network's Southern Californian Program Coordinator, (213) 482- 3021, Daniel@gsanetwork.org[1]
or go online to: gsanetwork.org or myspace.com/socalgsanetwork[2]

Recommendations for Teachers and School Staff

Teachers and school site staff who have the most contact with students are uniquely situated to help create a positive and safe school climate and help students achieve their full potential. Teachers and staff should :

? Intervene when they hear bias-related comments and slurs. Use each comment as an opportunity to provide education and reaffirm school policy.

? Request training on preventing harassment and discrimination, and ask to help publicize school policies on harassment.

? Set a climate in their classroom early and as often as necessary, letting students know that bias-related harassment and slurs are not acceptable.

? Treat all forms of biasrelated harassment and slurs as serious and preventable.

? Find out about community resources and information related to sexual orientation and gender identity.

? Integrate representations of LGBT people and discussion of sexual or orientation and gender

identity into existing curricula.

Recommendations for Students

If students feel safe and empowered, they have the ability to make their schools safer. Students can:

? Speak out when they hear slurs or negative comments like "that's so gay."

? Start a Gay-Straight Alliance to help fight harassment and discrimination at school, or join the club if one already exists.

? Find out if the school harassment policy includes harassment based on actual and perceived sexual orientation and gender, including gender identity, appearance, and behavior and advocate for changing the policy if it does not.

? Find out how to make a complaint when harassment occurs.

? Speak out in support of specific steps school districts and school can take: publicizing and enforcing anti-harassment policies, supporting GSAs, providing resources to students, training teacher and other staff, measuring bias-related harassment in their local school district, and including LGBT people and information about sexual orientation and gender identity in the curriculum.

Recommendations for Parents, Guardians and Community Members

Parents, guardians and other members of the school community have a role to play in ensuring the school environments are safe places for all students to learn.

Parents, guardians, and community members should:

? Ask their children what happens at school when biasrelated name-calling, harassment, and bulling occur.

Ask their children if they know what to do if they are harassed.

? Talk to their children about sexual or orientation and gender identity, name calling, and discrimination.

? Speak out in support of specifics steps school districts and school can take: publicizing and enforcing anti-harassment policies, supporting GSAs, providing resources to students, training teacher and other staff, measuring bias-related harassment in their local school district, and including LGBT people and information about sexual orientation and gender identity in the curriculum.

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