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Highlights From Queer Youth Advocacy Day/GAYLA 2009

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An inspiring crowd of LGBT students and allies rallied at the State Capitol in Sacramento on Monday, April 20th, 2009 to demonstrate their support for key legislation to honor Harvey Milk and to increase access to mental health services for at-risk youth. Youth activists traveled from as far as San Diego to attend the annual event, many traveling by bus through out the night.

?I wanted to help with the movement of LGBTQ issues while it is happening. I don?t want to look back and think, why didn?t I help?? ? Youth participant

Outspoken and inspiring, these fierce youth activists passionately shared their stories and called on lawmakers to make California?s schools safer. Student speakers were joined on stage by trail-blazing LGBT legislators, including Senator Mark Leno, Senator Christine Kehoe and Assemblymembers Bonnie Lowenthal and Tom Ammiano.

?The most powerful part was hearing everyone?s personal stories that had to do with LGBTQ issues. Also, just being around this many gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender people has inspired me to do more for the LGBTQ community.? ? Youth participant

Following the rally, youth went in small groups to meet with elected officials representing their hometowns. In total they met with an impressive 56 legislative offices! In the meetings, students shared their stories of harassment, bullying and discrimination in school, reminding lawmakers that much work still needs to be done to insure that California?s schools are safe places to learn for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and gender-nonconforming students.

Youth activists asked lawmakers to pass the Harvey Milk Day Bill (SB572) in order to educate all Californians about the important contributions of LGBT leaders to our state?s history. Clearly inspired by Milk, the first openly gay man elected to a major public office, students created signs honoring the legendary leader with phrases like ?We are all Harvey Milk? in English and Spanish.

?I will try to be more active in my community by speaking about Harvey Milk and other LGBTQ leaders.? ? Youth participant

An overwhelming number of students had very personal reasons for imploring state legislators to pass The Mental Health Services for At-Risk Youth Bill (SB 543). This important bill would allow youth ages 12-17 to consent to mental health treatment or counseling without parental permission. Requiring parental consent is a major barrier for LGBT youth who can find themselves in emotionally damaging and sometimes physically threatening situations if they come out to their parents prematurely and without support. Student after student spoke about times when they were seriously depressed or suicidal but were unable to seek counseling because they weren?t ready or didn?t feel safe coming out to their parents. They urged their representatives to address this issue by passing SB 543.
Student leaders also conducted successful meetings with the California Department of Education and California School Boards Association, reminding them once again that it is not enough to pass laws protecting LGBT students; the laws must be enforced!

"Best part of the event? Actually meeting with my representatives and convincing them successfully to co-author the bills.? ? Youth participant

Prior to Monday?s activities, over 60 youth leaders attended an intensive 3-day training called the GSA Advocacy & Youth Leadership Academy (GAYLA). This training covered the legislative process, policy and administrative advocacy, media activism, and other important leadership skills for students working to fight homophobia and transphobia in school.

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