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Central Valley Comes Alive with ENS Pride!

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Central Valley LGBTQ and Ally youth erupted with pride at GSA Network's Expression Not Suppression conference on March 20th in Fresno. The annual Central Valley conference brought together more than 100 youth from all over the Central Valley to engage in youth leadership workshops, education on laws and legal rights, exploring spirituality, and organizing to create safer school climates. The conference is in its sixth year and was put on by GSA Network in collaboration with Community Link, a Fresno area LGBTQ and Ally organization.

This year's keynote speaker was Kip Williams, an organizer with GetEQUAL and key organizer of last year's National Equality March on Washington with Equality Across America. Williams shared with youth what he called his "non-traditional story of coming to activism." For example, "In 2000 I voted for Bush, now I'm working to pass ENDA and repeal Prop 8." Williams' speech explored how students can help move legislation forward, "It is key to know, civil rights have never been handed to us, we have had to fight for them." Williams spoke about the repercussions of Proposition 8's passing, and the new generation of activists who were mobilized.

Afterwards, Williams reflected with us that, "To have the opportunity to speak to youth in Fresno was incredible. The Central Valley is such a vital and important part of the fabric of California. It is a key area where work needs to be done to change hearts and minds. I felt honored to be invited to speak before youth who are doing just that work."

Benji Kahikhina, a senior from small-town Coalinga High School, agreed that it was important to have a conference in the Central Valley "to allow gay youth such as myself to learn more about gay issues and safe schools laws that many teens aren't aware of." He went on to say, "ENS definitely has changed my feelings about being a gay individual. For starters, I'm extremely proud of who I am now. Looking back on my years in high school I was uncomfortable with being gay, and attending ENS has shown me that is is absolutely okay to be who I am and that I should stand proud and fight for my beliefs. I hope all youth can have that experience."

Justin Kamimoto, a junior at Clovis North High School who attended ENS said, "It's important that at the conference everybody accepted LGBTQ individuals and their straight allies because not all the time are we accepted at school. I went to learn things that I can bring back to my Gay-Straight Alliance club at Clovis North High School so we can continue to get more education out there about homophobia and how much it really hurts people."

Workshop topics this year ranged from coming out to how straight allies can help their LGBT friends to knowing your rights. Other workshops focused on learning about opportunities for activism in school and community resources. Most workshops were youth-led. One of the most popular workshops this year was called, "Hello GOD...I'm Gay" which explored issues of spirituality. Also popular was "On these Shoulders We Stand" about GLBT History.

"The workshop that really hit me," said Justin Kamimoto, "was the movie on LGBT history. The movie put me in tears because of how much I learned about LGBT history and what a long fight our community has been in. A lot of people see it as a short-term fight, something that is new or recent. As youth we have to live with homophobic behavior every day. What hit us was seeing how severe it was in history, and that this has been a long-term struggle that was in many ways bigger than us. That was really powerful."

This year's ENS also included a resource faire that included local LGBT community groups, service providers, and ally organizations.

"Having attended conferences and events all over the country," said Danielle Askini, National Program Manager at GSA Network, "The youth in the Central Valley really are some of the most courageous youth I have had the honor to work with. The fact that so many youth attend and that most of the workshops are youth-led is extremely impressive and inspiring. These youth are truly leading the transformation of schools and communities in the Central Valley to create safe atmospheres for LGBTQ and Ally students."

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