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Out in High School ? and Looking Forward to It

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NLGJA Insight
Alex Liu

High school junior Benji Delgadillo will begin this school year differently than in years past — he's coming out.

The 16-year-old, who identifies as gender queer, will now relate to his classmates at San Juan Hills High as a male. And while he lives in a conservative southern California town in Orange County, he's looking forward to the school year.

"I'm a little nervous," he said. "But I feel really great. I think the next year will be really crucial for me."

Delgadillo didn't always feel so good. His parents are Catholic and disapprove of his decision to transition.

It wasn't until this past April that he found the confidence to come out. He attended a three-day leadership training in Sacramento held by the Gay Straight Alliance Network, a California-based nonprofit focused on empowering youth to fight homophobia and transphobia in schools.

"It was the best three days of my life," Delgadillo said. "It changed my life."

Sixty high school students ranging from 14 to 18 years old from all over the state attended the annual training, which started in 2008. During the GSA Advocacy and Youth Leadership

Academy, students learn about the legislative process and policy advocacy. The weekend culminates in the annual Queer Youth Advocacy Day, in which the students descend on the state Capitol building in order to educate policy organizations and lawmakers about the importance of fostering safe school environments.
This year, the state legislature passed two bills the students advocated for — SB 543, which would increase youth access to mental health services, and AB 1680, which would prohibit contracts from requiring people to waive any hate crime rights. Both bills currently await Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's signature.

"It takes courage for youth to talk to lawmakers," said former state Sen. Shiela Kuhl, the first openly gay lawmaker elected to the California Legislature in 1994. "To have young people to really detail their experience of physical violence and thoughts of suicide, I think that it has shown legislators how real these problems are."

Executive director Carolyn Laub founded the Gay Straight Alliance Network in 1998. At that time, only 40 public high schools in California had Gay Straight Alliance chapters. Today, there are 796, or more than half of public high schools in the state. Laub is excited to see that many of the new chapters are in southern California, especially in historically disenfranchised low-income and minority communities.

"Often, lawmakers will say they had no idea there were even queer youth in their district," said Laub. "To see the moment of empowerment, when a youth realizes one voice can make a difference, that's the lifeblood that sustains me."

Now there are over 4,000 Gay Straight Alliance chapters across the country, according to Laub. While California has one of the nation's highest percentages of chapters in public high schools, 28 states have statewide Gay Straight Alliance coalitions or networks, with Utah being most recently added in April.

Upon returning from his leadership training, Delgadillo organized a fundraising campaign with the 30-member chapter of his school's Gay Straight Alliance to teach his classmates about gay civil rights leader Harvey Milk, selling "Harvey Milkshakes" after school. This year, he plans to continue such events, including a National Day of Silence action to bring attention to anti-LGBT bullying and an educational campaign about the LGBT civil rights movement.

For Delgadillo, however, it's meeting and working with other like-minded students that has had the biggest effect on him.

"It was amazing to find a group of people and feel like we're all in this together, we're fighting for this together," he said. "I finally found the family I never got to have."

(Editor's Note: Alex Liu served on the board of the Gay Straight Alliance Network for one year,

from 2008-2009.)

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GSA Network 1550 Bryant St., Suite 600, San Francisco, CA 94103 | 415-552-4229 | info@gsanetwork.org

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