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Central Valley Youth & Allies Are Making It Better!

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On Saturday, March 26, LGBTQ & Ally youth from all over the Central Valley came together for GSA Network's powerful **Expression Not Suppression** (ENS) conference 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, learning how to have healthy relationships, exploring spirituality, and organizing to create safer school climates. This year also featured a new workshop just for teachers and educators on what they can do to support LGBTQ & Ally youth in making their schools better. The conference is in its seventh year and was put on by GSA Network in collaboration with Community Link, a Fresno-area LGBTQ and Ally organization.

This year?s action-packed ENS featured three keynote speakers: **Robin McGehee**, the founder of **GetEQUAL** and key organizer of 2009?s **National Equality March** on Washington as well as a leader in the recent fight to repeal Don?t Ask, Don?t Tell; out lacrosse player and educator **Andrew McIntosh** who is working to make sports a safer place for LGBTQ people; and **Matt Mazzei**, founder of the **Rainbow Delegation**, an organization that distributes free rainbow wristbands to people across the world who wear them as a sign of support for the LGBTQ community. **Andrew** talked about the ENS conference?s youth energy. ?I was so honored that GSA Network had me out here today to be a part of this great day celebrating diversity,? said Andrew. ?It?s so great to be here with all of these young people, these young

minds, and just to be around this energized crowd and see all the potential that?s out there.?

The conference even held a complete surprise for one of its key youth organizers. **Peter Robinson**, of the **Bulldog Pride Fund at Fresno State**, unexpectedly took the stage Saturday morning and announced that the Fund was offering a $2000 **GSA Network scholarship ?** to 17-year-old **Justin Kamimoto**!

Justin, the founder and President of his GSA at **Clovis North High School** in Fresno, achieved real change in his school with support from GSA Network. In addition to running an anti-slur campaign and setting up a resource center for GSA members, Justin said, ?We established a place for students to feel safe. On our campus, at the beginning of the year, we noticed that none of our GSA members said they felt safe, but now, a couple of months after taking our survey, we can proudly say that we are a safe campus.?

Justin, who was also a member of the youth planning committee and trained his peers at ENS on how to build strong GSAs, shared: ?My favorite part of ENS was seeing the community coming together. The Central Valley is so tight knit that it brings a family feel when the LGBTQ & Ally community comes together. My favorite workshop though was the **Transgender 101** one. There is so much misconception of the T in LGBT that it shed new lights for me to bring back to my GSA about the Transgender community.?

Tyra Vasquez, a sophomore at **Edison High School** in Fresno, also helped plan ENS and led the workshop on LGBTQ students? legal rights. Tyra was eager to be involved with ENS because she was ready to help the movement to make safer schools in the Central Valley. Tyra said, ?I wanted to do my part in helping my peers better equip themselves for whatever might come their way.?

Benji Kahikhina, an alum from **Coalinga High School** and former GSA Network youth leader, agreed that it was important to have a conference in the Central Valley. Benji reflected that, ?Conferences like GSA Network?s **Expression Not Suppression** really help individuals by giving them somewhere that they can go. They?re not only going to a place where they?re going to be learning more about themselves or how to deal with everyday life situations, or protecting their rights. It?s also opening them up to a whole new world because they?re surrounded by people who understand them, whether they be lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, or even questioning.?

Workshop topics this year ranged from coming out to having healthy relationships to knowing your rights.

Other workshops focused on learning about opportunities for activism in school, building strong GSAs and using community resources. Students were very interested in the workshop explaining what their legal rights are and how to get schools to respect those rights.
This year's ENS also had a resource fair that included local LGBT community groups, service providers, and ally organizations, such as The Trevor Project, Community Link, Straight Allies For Equality, PFLAG, TransEmotion, and the Rainbow Delegation. GSA Network?s table featuring our great resources and gear was also a huge hit!

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