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Youth Activists Rally to Make it Better for All California Students

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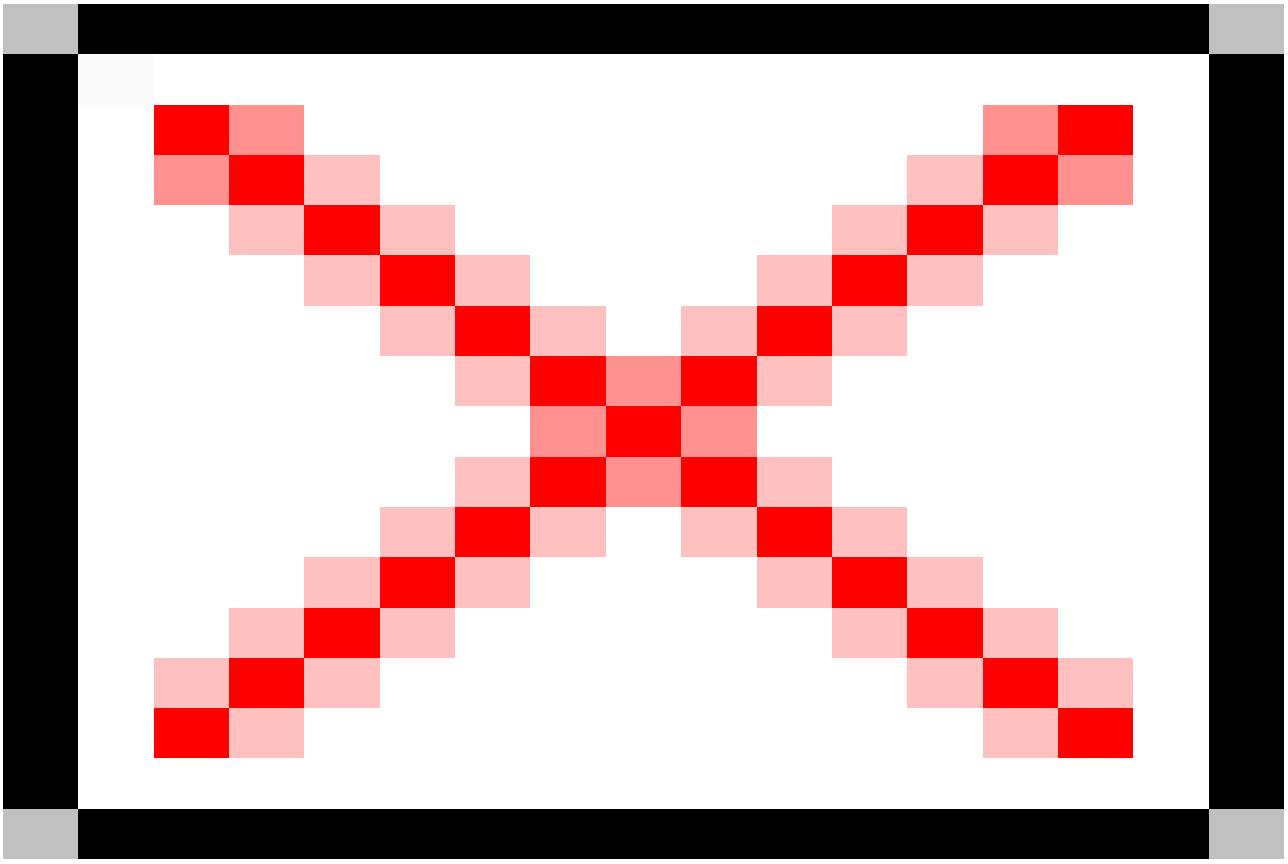
While many high school students were at the beach for Spring Break, nearly 70 youth activists from Gay-Straight Alliance clubs across California descended on the California State Capitol in Sacramento to rally and speak out for the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning (LGBTQ) youth.



These high school activists arrived in Sacramento on Friday, April 1st, 2011 to attend the GSA Advocacy and Youth Leadership Academy (GAYLA). Over the three-day training, the youth gained leadership skills and learned how to speak about LGBTQ issues to their legislators and the media. ?The trainings were created in a way that fostered a positive environment where everyone, regardless of how much or how little activism they had before GAYLA, was able to learn,? said**Claudia Chen**, a junior at Temple City High School and GAYLA Youth Trainer.

At Queer Youth Advocacy Day on Monday, April 4th, 2011, youth spoke to their state legislators and the media about three bills in the California legislature:Seth?s Law (AB 9)[1], theGender Nondiscrimination Act (AB 887)[2] and theFair, Accurate, Inclusive and Respectful (FAIR) Education Act (SB 48)[3]. "Bullying and harassment continue to be a pervasive problem in California schools, with heartbreaking consequences. Youth leaders from Gay-Straight Alliance clubs across the state told their stories to lawmakers who have the opportunity to make it better for LGBT youth by supporting the FAIR Education Act, Seth's Law, and the Gender Nondiscrimination Act," said **Carolyn Laub**, Executive Director of Gay-Straight Alliance Network.

Queer Youth Advocacy Day also included a rally and press conference with a number of youth speakers and State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson, Senator Mark Leno (D-San Francisco), Senator Christine Kehoe (D-San Diego), and Assemblymembers Rich Gordon (D-San Mateo), Tom Ammiano (D-San Francisco), Toni Atkins (D-San Diego), and Ricardo Lara (D-Bell Gardens).

For many youth, this was their first time visiting Sacramento, speaking to their legislators and actively participating in government. ?I didn?t have a strong desire for voting in our government or being a part of our government until I went to GAYLA and attended Queer Youth Advocacy Day,? said **Kyler Elliott**, a senior at Righetti High School. ?I spoke with Gavin Newsom, our Lieutenant Governor and he opened my eyes to how I could make a difference. And now I really want to.?

Over the training weekend, GAYLA participants were also able to speak with high school youth from Arizona who attended the event for the first time. The Arizona youth activists shared information about the civil rights issues in the Arizona state legislature. ?The experience was eye-opening. Talking to the youth from Arizona and hearing about their struggles over rights that we here in California take for granted infuriated me, but also made me determined to fight for the rest of my life for equality, nationwide.? said**Brandon Serpas**, a sophomore at Schurr High School.

After returning home from their time in Sacramento, many of the youth were inspired to create change in their school communities and to ensure that their schools were in compliance with the current laws. ?I started using better legal terms when it came to informing my school about the laws they are neglecting to enforce,? said**Javi Pinedo**, a high school senior and GSA Network Youth Council Member. ?GAYLA truly gave me the tools to become a bigger and better activist than I was before and now I feel like there?s no stopping me.? **K.Gottlieb**, a 10th grader from San Diego, has begun working to address his school?s gender binary uniform policies. ?I already started talking to my principal about and writing proposals for changing my school?s non-discrimination policy to make it more inclusive of LGBT students,? he said. ?I have also started working on making my school?s dress code less gendered.?

To the youth who attended GAYLA and Queer Youth Advocacy Day, this weekend was more than learning laws and bills, it was a safe space for them to meet other LGBTQ and straight allied youth and share the stories of bullying and empowerment. ?What I found most valuable at GAYLA was my ?family? and the support and love we all had for one another,? said**Mickey Stone**, a junior at Simi Valley High School. **Foster Trio Harris III**, of Carlsbad High School, echoed these sentiments, stating, ?GAYLA gave so much more to me than another trip over spring break. It gave me courage to express myself everywhere at any time.?

GAYLA and Queer Youth Advocacy Day were sponsored byGay-Straight Alliance Network[4],Equality California Institute[5],The Trevor Project[6]andTransgender Law Center[7]. All of us at GSA Network would like to extend our sincere appreciations to the co-sponsoring organizations, youth participants and trainers, elected officials, staff, volunteers, college mentors, and generous donors who together made this event a success. Thank you!

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[1] http://gsanetwork.org/news/seth%E2%80%99s-law-proposed-make-safer-schools-%E2%80%A8-california-students/031511
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