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GSA Network Goes to Washington

Aug. 18, 2011 ? Geoffrey

"I learned that there's so much more out there than I ever knew there could be. Amazing people you never knew could exist until you walk through the doors and into the National Gathering." -- **Cat Kryjak**, Long Island Youth Delegate.

What do you get when you fly 40 youth activists and 30 adult allies- representing 20 states to Washington, D.C.? GSA Network's **National Gathering**, that's what! Over the past six years, GSA Network's National Program has been organizing the National Gathering, a convening of the National Association of GSA Networks [1] and other statewide organizations supporting GSAs and youth leaders across the country. Currently, the National Association of GSA Networks has a membership of over 30 states ranging from Arizona to Massachusetts and Illinois to Utah. At National Gathering, youth delegates and staff teamed up to share skills around youth organizing and, best practices in fighting oppression.

?? This year, the theme for the conference was **"Make It Better for All - GSAs and Educational Justice"**. For the first time, Alliance for Educational Justice [2] (AEJ) was a guest organization and shared how GSAs can join the fight for educational justice and school reform. Later, the youth activists participated in an interactive workshop led by AEJ and **Geoffrey Winder**, GSA Network's Racial and Economic Justice Manager. In the workshop, the youth learned about the educational justice barriers for LGBT youth, and LGBT youth of color in particular, which push them out of the school system.?

"I was really pleased with how well the young folks understood the concepts and connected larger issues to issues within their own schools," Geoffrey reflected. "LGBT youth have a harder time getting a quality education and graduating due to lack of resources and harsher discipline policies." Many folks left the conference with new energy and enthusiasm to Make It Better in

schools for all youth. **Stephanie Robinson**, staff member at the newly formed Massachusetts GSA Network [3], was amazed at the possibilities for change through GSAs. "I believe that Alliance for Educational Justice brought awareness to a completely different side of education and GSAs." **Javi Pinedo**, a California GSA Network youth also enjoyed the interactive way AEJ and GSA Network explained the **School to Prison Pipeline**. "The most exciting part was the dramatization of how the School to Prison Pipeline works and how the youth can be affected by it," Javi exclaimed. "I am bringing back my expanding knowledge about racial justice and I will try to get more queer people of color to join the movement and help GSAs see the intersections between racism and homophobia."??

After attending such empowering workshops, the group took some time to relax, hear their fellow activists perform spoken word pieces and explore the Capitol. The youth were excited to take the D.C. Rainbow Tour of Dupont Circle, the historic LGBT community in Washington, D.C. They also learned more about the intersection of LGBT history and the Civil Rights movement during a screening of "Brother Outsider: The Life of Bayard Rustin." [4] Rustin was a Black, gay Civil Rights leader who organized the famous March on Washington in the 1960s.??

The youth really felt a connection between their work with one another on a national level and their presence in the country's capitol. "I feel like the most valuable part was the connections I made here, as well as learning about Trans [culture] and how to reach out to schools," voiced **Jessica LeBron**, a Youth Delegate from Oregon Safe Schools and Communitites Coalition [5]. The new bonds he made with fellow youth activists encouraged **Isaias Guzman**, a California GSA Network Youth Trainer, to continue social justice work at home. "The most exciting part of the gathering was being able to make connections with each other, regardless of the fact that we come from different parts of the country. We are ultimately still able to find our commonalities and work together."

SMYAL
SAFE SPACE TO BE WHO YOU ARE
SINCE 1984
[6]

GSA Network would like to extend a huge thank you to Sexual Minority Youth Assistance League [7] (SMYAL), the local host organization of National Gathering. Since 1984, SMYAL has been a provider of LGBT youth services and community support. They recently joined the National Association of GSA Networks. ?SMYAL was honored to serve as the host committee for the

2011 National Gathering, an opportunity for students, staff, and allies nationwide to collaborate, share stories, exchange resources, discuss best practices, and build the GSA movement," said **Stephanie Remick**, the GSA and Youth Leadership Coordinator at SMYAL. "We were overwhelmed by the energy and kindness of our national peer organizations and look forward to developing these relationships over the next year!?

??We would also love to thank our National Gathering 2011 Steering Committee Members: **Elana Rosenberg** of Youth Pride, Inc [8]. Rhode Island, **Saben Littlefield** of Outright Vermont [9], **Daniel Ramos** of One Colorado [10], **David Fischer** of Illinois Safe Schools Alliance [11], and **Graham Brinklow** of Indiana Youth Group [12].

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