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Making Schools FAIR For All! Youth Empowerment Summit 2011

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Imagine starting your day off in an auditorium with

energetic LGBTQA youth and adult allies, listening to speakers talk about the safe schools movement, and even doing a little jig that we here at GSA Network call the ?fruit salute??

Well?that?s exactly what youth from all over Northern California did on Saturday, December 10th at GSA Network?s annual **Youth Empowerment Summit (YES)**! Attendance at the San Francisco based conference topped 500 ? a record for YES in its seven-year history! Buena

Vista Horace Mann Community School welcomed YES for a second year and provided a welcoming space for youth activists to learn skills to fight homophobia and transphobia in their schools.

This year, a bus of over 80 youth drove up from Santa Cruz County [1], organized by the Queer Youth Task Force, local schools, and generous donors. Youth also traveled all the way from Eugene Oregon to be at YES! GSA Network is proud of the organized efforts of these GSAs and the adult supporters who made their trips possible.

In the opening session of the conference, activists heard from GSA Network youth leaders **Benji Delgadillo**, a senior at San Juan Hills High School and **Sam Alavi**, a junior at Aragon High School who delivered a joint keynote address on the importance of the FAIR Education Act [2], a new law in California. Benji and Sam explained steps youth and adults can take right now to have lessons on LGBTQ and disability history and movements in their classes. **Teresa Favuzzi**, Executive Director of the California Foundation for Independent Living Centers [3], also spoke to the youth and showcased a video of students with disabilities discussing the importance of learning about their history in schools. **Favuzzi explained the connections between working across lines of disability, sexual orientation and gender identity so that ALL youth can feel safe and welcome.**

Throughout the day, youth leaders attended over 30 workshops on identity, arts and activism. Workshops included the youth-lead How to Have a Kick-Ass GSA by GSA Network NorCal youth

trainers, Opening the Locker Room Closet with Equality Coaching Alliance [4], LGBTQ Students Know Your Rights facilitated by the ACLU of Northern California [5], Spoken Word with the Eureka Valley Recreation Center, and much more! ??GSA Network NorCal Youth Council members co-facilitated ?Not In Our School? film screenings with KQED, highlighting the activism youth can do in their schools to reduce slurs and stereotypes. Eureka Valley Recreation Center also hosted a kick-ass game of dodge ball on the courtyard in the afternoon, where dozens of youth networked and engaged in a little friendly competition!

?YES really empowered me. I really liked participating in the ?Not In Our School? film screening and hearing about how slurs are a big problem at other schools too,? said **James Patch**, a junior at Menlo-Atherton High School. ?As soon as I got home I wrote up a whole list of things I want to do with my school and other schools near me!?

Youth were able to attend regional meet-ups where they could network with youth from their hometowns and discuss the issues relevant to their local communities. ?It was really fun meeting people from my area and hearing about issues at their schools. I learned a lot of students are having a difficult time which is why I?m so glad YES exists,? exclaimed **Ellie Welsh-Ferreyra**, a junior at Holy Names High School.

In the closing session, students watched a video that they made in a morning workshop on the importance of youth being the change agents who make it better and make history. The video

was screened as an official **GSA Network Make It Better Project** video and drew rounds of applause.?? And of course, what?s a big queer conference without a big queer youth dance? At the close of the conference, the youth leaders were treated to a youth-only dance and drag show, where they got to strut their stuff on a drag catwalk. Youth cheered each other on and danced the night away. At the end of the night, youth exchanged hugs and facebook friend requests and promised to stay in touch and make change at their schools.

?I kept getting big hugs from youth who said ?I can?t wait to come back next year!? which means YES is doing what it was intended to do-- to provide a space for youth networking and sharing of stories and skills so they can ultimately make change in their schools, said conference organizer and Northern California Program Coordinator, Amanda Harris. ?This year?s conference was a huge success and I am incredibly grateful for everyone who made it happen this year.?

GSA Network would like to give a big thanks to the youth Steering Committee who planned the Youth Empowerment Summit! We?d also love to thank GSA Network staff and interns, our amazing volunteers who worked the event, the staff of Buena Vista Horace Mann Community School including the custodians Carlos and Alicia and tech-guru James Canales, and Sam Haynor for the Make It Better video for all their help.

Thank you to our sponsors Genentech, PG&E, KQED for sponsoring the event. We?d also like to thank Sports Basement, Rainbow Grocery, Trader Joe?s, Sir Richard?s, Health Initiatives for Youth, Stop AIDS Project, Planned Parenthood-Shasta Pacific, Sour Flour Bakery, Arizmendi Bakery, and the Trevor Project for their in-kind donations.

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[1] http://www.santacruzsentinel.com/community/ci_19534918
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