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Youth Empowerment Summit 2009

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What do rainbow elephants, dancing penguins in tutus, and glittering fairies all have in common? They were NOT at the Youth Empowerment Summit that took place Saturday, December 5th. But you know who was? Approximately 400 youth and adults who came to Everett Middle School to learn about youth activism, leadership, and empowerment!

This was the 6th annual YES conference and what a conference it was! Youth from all over the Bay Area and Northern California came to educate themselves on issues relating to their legal rights, coming out, and safer sex.

There were three amazing keynote speakers who all touched on important topics that anyone in the audience could potentially relate to, from coming out and family acceptance to finding your voice as a youth activist and artist to celebrating our LGBT heroes and the historic victory of Harvey Milk Day being established in California. Shout out to Sandra Fewer, Kirk Read, and State Senator Mark Leno for making the journey to come speak to the youth!

And a HUGE shout out goes to the YES Steering Committee members. Youth were a MAJOR part of organizing this conference. From attending meetings and calling in weekly, to facilitating workshops, to leading discussion spaces the day of, to dancing up a storm on and off the stage, these youth were an integral part of organizing the YES conference.

AJ Fiel, a student at Merrill F. West in Tracy and a youth steering committee member, reflected that, "It was nice to see so many activists our age that actually care for our community. . . I learned new things. . .and there is a lot more to be learned on the way towards being a stronger activist."

What was particularly fun and inspiring was seeing alumni from the past YES steering committees come back to contribute their skills and knowledge. Rigo Machado, a YES steering committee member from 2007, came back to facilitate a workshop and to put on an amazing performance that would put Lady GaGa to shame. Rigo, now a student at Diablo Valley College, says "YES was great! It was cool to see youth learn skills they can use at their high school to fight homophobia."

Many youth and adults wrote that they can't wait for the next YES conference. We hope to see you there next year! And be sure to be on the lookout for those rainbow elephants.

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