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## A Year in Reflection ? A Conversation with GSA Network?s Public Allies

Jun. 23, 2010 ? Danielle

In the fall of 2009, GSA Network made the strategic decision to participate in the Public Allies program and invite two Public Allies to join our staff. Public Allies is an organization that matches youth leaders who are interested in working in non-profits with organizations who are seeking new talent. For GSA Network, the partnership with Public Allies made complete sense as both organizations are striving to develop young leaders. This year, we were joined by Alex Tran who worked as a Program Associate at our San Francisco office while Julia Valle served as our Central Valley Program Associate.

We sat down with Julia and Alex to ask them to reflect on their year at GSA Network.

**GSA Network:** Julia and Alex, what are some of your favorite memories from this past year??

**Julia Valle (JV):** Probably my favorite was the whole day of Youth Empowerment Summit (YES) in San Francisco. The summit had my adrenaline pumping ? seeing so many youth there, so many young people running workshops that I had helped to coordinate. YES was really the first big conference that I had helped plan. Seeing YES come together successfully was really amazing.

**Alex Tran (AT):** My favorite memory was doing a legal rights workshop with another GSA Network staff member at the Expression Not Suppression conference in Fresno. We presented to a packed room of youth who were really energized and excited to advocate for themselves in creating safer schools. I really drew off their energy. **I left feeling reenergized after having come so far in my time at GSA Network. Having successfully led the workshop made me feel prepared for anything.**

**GSA Network:** Could you highlight one moment working with a young person that captured what it was like working with youth?

**JV:** I visited a GSA at Ripon High School, which is in a really conservative town, and **a student came up, after what I thought was a very boring site visit, and said ?I really appreciate the work that you?re doing, even if it means that you have to come out here and talk to us for 45 minutes it is really meaningful and gives me the knowledge of how I can protect myself and my friends.?**

For so many students, just knowing about AB 537, the student non-discrimination law, and who the administrators and teachers in the school were that supported her revolutionized her school experience. **It really hit me, that the work I was doing was changing lives.**

**AT:** While helping with a Northern California Youth Council meeting, I was really impressed by a student, Max, and his presence and input. Max is a trans-identified middle schooler who really stood up for LGBT equality in his middle school and his GSA there. And **whenever I have to think about what inspires me to do this work, and our time as a Public Ally, I think about the bravery that Max displays** and his willingness to always give input even though he's not the most outgoing person at Youth Council.

**GSA Network:** What would you say to other folks who are interested in being a Public Ally with GSA Network?

**AT:** A Public Ally should be really excited about the opportunity to work with GSA Network because of the huge impact they will have on a community. They will definitely help hundreds of youth who are low-income, people of color, and LGBTQ-identified which is what Public Allies is all about. No matter what their interest in social justice is, they will work on issues that they are passionate about. In terms of their personal development, GSA Network is incredibly supportive of increasing an Ally's concrete tools and experience around skills like event planning and program management. ?

**GSA Network:** How has your experience at GSA Network been different than what you imagined? ?

**JV:** I was pleasantly surprised with how many active youth there were, and how active the youth are. Most importantly was the larger participation of youth in all parts of this organization. There are youth who are so eloquent and such great leaders. It gives me hope for the movement that there are so many dedicated young people being trained now; I know that the future will be bright because of them.

**AT:** **I was happily surprised to see how much GSA Network connects youth leadership work with the national LGBTQ movement. I learned that even though GSA Network is a California-based organization its resources and its collaborations really help push forward our movement on a much larger scale. I was really honored to be a part of that.**

**GSA Network:** What has been your biggest personal or professional challenge coming into this??

**JV:** When I first came to work with GSA Network, I didn't really know my role as a straight ally, and I was concerned that the students wouldn't connect with me or trust me. I've come to learn that my worry and concern really wasn't necessary. I have learned that being a straight ally is a vital role in the community and for young people simply to know that I am a resource and a support has been amazing.

**GSA Network:** What would you say is one professional skill you have gained since joining GSA Network?

**AT:** I feel like I have gained a sense that I can make it in this professional world. As a typically very casual person, I feel a sense of accomplishment in that I have succeeded and worked well in a professional setting while not having to sacrifice my personality. On a personal level I have really appreciated having a queer space at work. I think it is a great privilege to have that and to be so comfortable in that arena.

**JV:** I feel like what I have gained the most is the ability to talk to school administrators and not be intimidated by their position. Coming in, I had a sense that they were the higher power. The administrators of schools frequently use intimidation to their advantage. What is most apparent to me now is that I am on equal footing with people in positions of authority. **In the face of an authority figure, where I know that there is injustice happening, I don't shrink away.** I step up to the plate and talk to them. I think that has been both personally empowering and incredibly important for the young people I work with.

**GSA Network:** How has GSA Network changed your perception on queer organizing work???

**AT:** I have been so excited nearly every other day because I see how much our staff work with luminaries in the LGBTQ movement. For example, it was amazing to me to know that our Advocacy Program Manager could talk to Shannon Minter about Prop 8 or other stuff, when a couple months before I was watching Shannon Minter during the Prop 8 litigation on my computer in my dorm room at college. **GSA Network is really in the trenches doing the social justice work that I have always heard about in media,** and it is amazing to be in the hot gay center of the world.

**JV:** I really didn't have an idea of queer community organizing before this, although I did organize with the Pride group at my college. Working with GSA Network has really opened my eyes to the struggles of the youth especially in the Central Valley. These students put up with harassment, name-calling, and abuse. I never realized that there were organizations out there to help people in this situation. It has inspired me to continue to do this work after I come back from abroad, and to find similar organizations to do this work. It's sad that in the Central Valley, which I call home, is so hard to be a queer youth because there is no one to connect with. Lots of youth don't know that there are organizations to connect with, and now I know that I can be here to support queer youth in the Central Valley.

**GSA Network:** Thank you both so much for your service and dedication to GSA Network and the LGBTQ youth movement over the past year. We are going to miss you both, and we wish you a lot of success in your future!