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Innovators for youth honored: gay-straight network offers security and activism

The founder of a network that provides support for gay students and the founders of two effective nonprofits that provide hope and training for at-risk youths in Oakland and Santa Clara County are among the five winners of this year's [James Irvine Foundation Leadership Awards](#) [1].

Carolyn Laub, executive director of the Gay-Straight Alliance Network; Christa Gannon, the executive director of [Fresh Lifelines for Youth](#) [2] in Milpitas; and Olis Simmons, executive director of the [Youth UpRising](#) [3] center in East Oakland, each will receive \$125,000 to promote their transformational work.

Most indicators show more acceptance of gays and lesbians now ? in society at large and in schools ? than when Laub founded the Gay-Straight Alliance Network in San Francisco 14 years ago. Since then she has helped the number of Gay-Straight Alliance clubs in middle and high schools in California grow twentyfold, from 40 to more than 850.

But bullying of students with real or perceived differences in sexual orientation remains an ugly problem in many schools, compounded by its migration to social media beyond school borders. And then there?s the universal slur in middle school ? That?s so gay! ? that is hurtful to children already struggling with their differences.

The GSA Network confronts issues of harassment and works with teachers and administrators to improve school climate, but it does so by training and working with students themselves. ?Our model is youth empowerment,? says Laub. ?We train youth leaders to work with school administrators, teachers, and board members.?

Gay-Straight Alliance clubs are now in 56 percent of California high schools, and not just in liberal coastal areas. Eighty clubs are in the Central Valley, Laub says. There are between 13,000 and 15,000 members statewide in clubs ranging from a handful to dozens of members. There are about 1,300 students active in the Network?s conferences, trainings, and annual lobbying day in Sacramento. Laub estimates that about 30 percent of the activists are heterosexual teens, who joined to support their friends.

Some clubs are purely social; others organize school climate surveys and events to spread tolerance. All provide a sense of safety for students often struggling with loneliness and alienation. There are several dozen clubs in middle schools ? a hotbed of cruelty ? where students struggling with their sexuality and insecurity feel particularly vulnerable. Advocates trained by the Network have helped pass pioneering laws, including new anti-bullying rules for schools.

Keeping youths out of incarceration

Gannon, a Stanford Law School graduate, had planned on becoming a prosecutor but instead runs a program whose goal is to keep youths away from courts and county attorneys. Most of the 2,000 youths who take Fresh Lifelines for Youth's 12-week course on self-motivation, life choices, and the legal system have been in Juvenile Hall or in trouble. Seventy of those youths are chosen for a more intense yearlong leadership program with 2,500 hours of community service, while 70 others work one-on-one with adult mentors. Its record of preventing recidivism through the Leadership program is impressive; the cost savings are impressive as well: \$9,000 for the program versus \$100,000 per year in Juvenile Hall. Gannon expects to introduce the program in other parts of the state in the next decade.

Options and opportunities in East Oakland

Simmons? Youth UpRising provides mentoring, academic help, job training, art and music classes, and a free on-site health clinic serving 3,000 young people in an impoverished section of Oakland. From its founding seven years ago, it has grown into a \$7 million yearly operation with 80 employees. It also runs four enterprises employing 45 local youths: a restaurant and catering service, a multimedia production team, a janitorial company, and a data processing group.

Two additional recipients of the 2012 James Irvine Leadership Award are Craig McNamara, who is inspiring a next generation of farmers through his Solano County nonprofit the [Center for Land-Based Learning](#) [4], and Patricia Dennehy, who directs [Glide Health Service](#) [5], a nurse-managed health center serving 3,200 clients in the Tenderloin district of San Francisco.

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News Article

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Links

[1] <http://irvine.org/leadership>

[2] <http://www.flyprogram.org/>

[3] <http://youthuprising.org/>

[4] <http://landbasedlearning.org/>

[5] <http://glide.org/health>

[6] <http://toped.svefoundation.org/2012/02/14/innovators-for-youth-honored/>