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?It only gets better because we make it better?

Mar. 21, 2012 ? Dave

On Tuesday March 20, GSA Network Executive Director & Founder Carolyn Laub and I traveled to the University of Texas at Arlington to attend the first ever White House LGBT Conference on Safe Schools & Communities. It was an exciting and very busy day for all involved with conference, including the White House, United States Departments of Education and Justice, community partners like GSA Network and the young people in attendance.

The day began with an encouraging focus on non-punitive approaches to combatting bullying. Former GSA Network Board Member and current Senior Counselor at the US Department of Education, Bob Kim, facilitated a panel on creating safer schools for LGBT youth. The panel included Torey Cummings from the Civil Rights Division at the US Department of Justice, who reminded us that ?there are a number of things schools can do to address harassment beyond suspension,? and that we must ?be aware of the gut reaction to push youth out of schools**.?** She was accompanied by Michael Yudin, the Acting Assistant Secretary for Elementary & Secondary Education at the US Department of Education who spoke to the importance of "proactively engaging students in anti-bullying efforts.?

Following this panel, US Secretary of Education Arne Duncan addressed the room and assured LGBT youth that his ?office is ready to step in? when they are harassed or bullied. Senior Advisor to President Obama, Valerie Jarrett, followed up with an inspirational speech, declaring,

?it only gets better because we make it better [1]." She closed, like Secretary Duncan, with a strong statement of support for LGBT youth, emphasizing that ?the President of the United States is in your corner and will be with you every step of the way. We?ve got your back.?

This theme continued into the next speech, in which United States Attorney General Eric Holder declared that no one deserves to be bullied or harassed because of who they love. Holder discussed the important cases of suspected LGBT hate crimes that he and his office are investigating at record levels, and affirmed President Obama?s support for the principles for the Student Non-Discrimination Act [2]. He closed his moving speech by declaring ?I look forward to the progress that we can, and must, achieve together.

In the afternoon, GSA Network?s Carolyn Laub and Bob Kim from the US Department of Education facilitated workshops on "GSAs and Student Led Initiatives.? Other workshops included ?Federal Protections for LGBT Students [3],? ?LGBTQ Youth of Color,? ?Family Acceptance,? ?Violence & Harassment Against Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming People,? and ?Model K-12 Policies and Procedures,? which focused on the important decision on LGBT bullying that recently came from the Anoka-Hennepin School District in Minnesota and Texas?s recent bullying and harassment law.

Judy Shepard, mother of the late Matthew Shepard, brought the day to a poignant close. With her moving words and warm presence, Judy reminded the room of dedicated individuals how far we?ve come since the hate-driven murder of her son several years ago, but cautioned that there is still much work to be done. Illustrating both the progress and remaining challenges for LGBT youth, student activist and GSA president Tempest Cartwright gave Judy?s introduction and spoke about her own work in her Oklahoma school fighting homophobia and transphobia. Tempest?s brave life motto echoes the important work she and other youth activists are doing every day across the nation: ?When people put me down, it inspires me to stand up!?

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Links:
[1] http://www.makeitbetterproject.org
[2] http://www.aclu.org/snda
[3] http://community.pflag.org/claimyourrights