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First Conference to Educate Counselors of LGBTQI Youth - the Grad Student's Perspective

Part 2 of a 4 part series

Morgan M. Hurley, SDGLN Copyeditor | Thu, 01/21/2010 - 9:30am | [Bookmark](#)

In February, the very first conference focusing on the issues of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, Queer / Questioning & Intersex (LGBTQI) youth will be presented here in San Diego. This conference is for all school counselors and educators nationwide, and will include a wide range of topics, workshops, speakers and interactive activities. The conference is being run by The Center for Excellence in School Counseling (CESCal), a project which is an off-shoot of the School Counseling Graduate Program at San Diego State University, where Dr Trish Hatch is Director.

Hatch and her graduate students launched CESCal several years ago. The mission of CESCal is "to promote excellence in the field of school counseling and to assist school counselors, their site and central office administrators as they design, implement and evaluate their school counseling programs."

CESCal is run by the students on a volunteer basis, all driven by their desire to affect change in the world, one student at a time. This is their passion and the conference will touch a sector of kids who have until now, not had a support system in place during those difficult years.

In our first [story](#) of this series, the focus was on Dr Hatch and the conference.

In this second part of the series, SDGLN reached out to a number of Dr Hatch's grad students to find out what CESCal and the upcoming conference meant to them. Ironically none of the students we spoke to are from the LGBT community themselves, but their love for the program and enthusiasm for what they are doing and the conference itself shined through their answers. Dr Hatch's influence is also obvious, as the themes she promotes are consistent throughout.

Cady Barr has a BA in Social Work and is in her first year of study in the School Counseling program. Cady is CESCal's Director of Marketing and contributes between 3-10 hours per week as a volunteer. For the conference she has been working with speakers, exhibitors and contacting sponsors. She feels the conference has enhanced her leadership skills and will make her a stronger prospect in her profession.

"This conference is important to me because LGBTQI discrimination continues to be a problem in our society and LGBTQI youth are not getting the support that they need in the school setting," she explained. "Too often, kids who are suspected of being gay are victims of name calling and bullying, and educators and school counselors need more education on how to advocate for these students and create a safe environment for all students.

"My favorite thing about this Grad Program is that it has a focus on being an agent for social change and advocating for students. We are taught how to work with all of the stakeholders of schools (students, teachers, administration, parents, community services) so that we can help every student in their development into adulthood (academic, social and career development). CESCal ties in with this mission also allows grad students to be directly involved with leadership roles."

Another grad student, Eleina Vallejo, thinks the conference is important for the needs of not only LGBTQI youth, but for their family members, as well. She was a teenager when she found out her older brother was gay, and due to her religious background and cultural upbringing, she was extremely conflicted. As a result, she had no one to talk to about her own feelings and the struggles she was going through accepting the news. Knowing her brother also felt lost and isolated as a teenager, she sees tremendous value in educating counselors about these sensitive issues.

"The [School Counseling] Graduate Program is truly incomparable in terms of the preparation, conversations and fieldwork experience we get," Eleina explained. "I really believe that the level of exposure we get to diverse needs and conversations that we have about important and difficult topics has created strong, open-minded leaders.

"I want to be as informed and knowledgeable as possible, so that students do not have to go through the same experiences as I or my brother did," she continued. "I hope this conference helps bridge the gap that currently exists."

Eleina is a San Diego native and has a BA in Sociology & a minor in Psychology. She volunteers about 1-3 hours per week to CESCal generally, but as the conference approaches, she is contributing more in order to assist with recruiting sponsors

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The conference will educate school counselors on how to effectively advocate for LGBTQI students.

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and organizing the volunteer responsibilities list. The benefits of being involved with CESCAl have paid off just in the networking opportunities it has provided her.

Another San Diego native, Felipe Zanartu, has a BA in Women’s Studies, a double minor in Spanish & Global Studies, and a Master’s in Counseling. Not to leave a stone unturned, he is now in his first year of the School Counseling program. Felipe volunteers at CESCAl as coordinator of the audio/visual equipment, and he also helps with publicity and website maintenance. Working with the program has helped him grow as a leader in the school counseling community.

Felipe believes that school counselors are "systems change agents," a theme pulled straight from the Dr Hatch playbook. Felipe went on to quote Dr Hatch directly and add two cents of his own. "According to our Director, 'school counselors become professional student advocates who promote equality and access to a rigorous education for every student and work to prevent and remove barriers to learning.' What I am looking for," he continued, "is training to be a leader in my school and learning methods of creating change to better serve students. This conference definitely encapsulates that, as LGBT students are such an under-served population in schools."

After attending San Diego’s School for Creative and Performing Arts (SCPA) for 9 years, Ashley Kruger wasn’t even exposed to discrimination until she was older. Spending her formative years at SCPA, where everyone was respected for who they are as a person, she was surrounded by friends who were members of the LGBT community and never fathomed discriminating against any of them. She knows many that struggled with their sexuality and gets angry at people who continue to call sexual orientation a "choice."

"WHY on earth would anyone choose to be chastised? I believe these negative beliefs stem from ignorance and lack of exposure," she said. "I hope that this conference will educate and create awareness about how common it is for students to struggle with their sexual orientation or even gender identity. The negative messages that we receive about these differences create a strong dissonance for students.

"Furthermore," she continued, "many students have absolutely nobody to talk to, whether for religious reasons or lack of support. It is our job as educators, especially as school counselors, to support these students in whatever capacity they need, just like we would for any other student. It is crucial that we do not put our own judgments into our counseling. Part of our ethics state that we are responsible for providing support for ALL students, regardless of their sexual orientation.

Ashley is Director of Finance for CESCAl and has been throwing herself into the development of the conference, working with keynote speakers from all over the world, and ensuring the budget is in place.

She summed up her feelings about the conference, by saying, "I truly believe that the more that people hear about the topic of LGBTQI students, the more they will understand the importance of learning how to support them. As we know, suicide rates are highest among these students and we can not continue to allow this to happen. While it is cliché, knowledge is power, and knowing HOW to support our students is the first step."

The First Conference intended to Empower School Counselors and Educators about LGBTQI Issues will take place February 5-7 at the Mission Valley Hilton.

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