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Queer Youth Awards to honor Santa Cruz teens

Diversity Center recognizes young leaders

By KATHRYN GILLOCK

REGISTER-PAJARONIAN STAFF WRITER

Five young people from Santa Cruz County will be honored by the Diversity Center in Santa Cruz next for their dedication to human rights. Also to be awarded are seven youth allies and three organizations.

Along with handing out the Queer Youth Awards, the Diversity Center is putting on a variety show in which youth will read poetry, act out skits and sing.

"The purpose and goal behind the variety show is to get as many youth on stage as possible," said Charlie Singer, one of the show's organizers.

He explained that the use of the word "queer," which was historically considered offensive, is going through a reclamation.

"It's kind of like a 'take back the word,'" Singer said. "When we called it the Gay Youth Awards we were excluding lesbians and transgendered. It is kind of like the classification as other — it is a social movement."

"In bringing youth into the process we've learned that the

word "gay" does not accurately represent all the individuals contained in the LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered and questioning) community," he said. "I was taught all my life that it was offensive, but I had to just get over it because it is not about me, it's about these youth."

This is the fifth year the Diversity Center has handed out the awards, but this is the first year youth have been on the committee to choose the winners.

"This is the first time youth were judges," Singer said. "And I think it turned out great."

In all, there were five adult judges and four youth judges. Watsonville Police Chief Terry Medina was among the adult judges.

"I wanted to know more about a youth culture I don't really know anything about," he said. "It is difficult for queer youth to get the kind of recognition that others do in the mainstream."

Nikira Hernandez, Marisol Lorenzana, Kristen Sharpe, Kyle Wehrman and Kevin West are this

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year's winners of the Queer Youth Awards. Each of the youth winners is given a \$500 award.

"I was like 'oh my god,' and then I started screaming, and then the next day I lost my voice" West, 15, said, describing his reaction when he learned that he was a winner. "I was like, 'I won something.'"

West, a student at Dewitt Anderson School, knew he was a nominee for the award because the friends who nominated him told him about the nomination. Now that he is a winner, he is making plans for what to do with his \$500 award.

"I am going to take some of my friends to Chile's (restaurant) and then I am going to put the rest in the bank," he said.

West, who lives in Aptos, knows most of the other winners from different organization or activities.

"I have worked with most of them," he said.

The Youth Ally awards go to people in the community who have supported queer youth and encouraged them to be active in breaking down stereotypes. This year's winners are David Gonzalez, Marcia Stein, Carly Berdschensky, Bob Correa, Denny Carroll, Luis Juarez and Tami Kittle.

One organizations, Equinox, is also being honored for its service and support of queer youth.

The event will be held at Loud-en Nelson Community Center in Santa Cruz May 4. There are 240 seats available, but 120 will be reserved for youth. Adult tickets are nearly sold out, Singer said, but there are plenty of youth tickets still available.

Tickets are \$25 for adults and \$0 - \$10 for youth. For more information see the Queer Youth Leadership Awards Web site at www.diversitycenter.com, or call the Diversity Center at 425-5422.

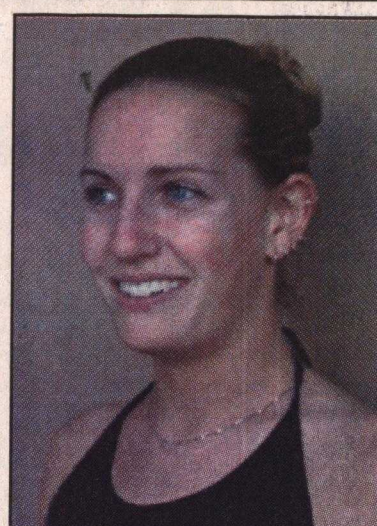
QUEER YOUTH AWARD WINNERS



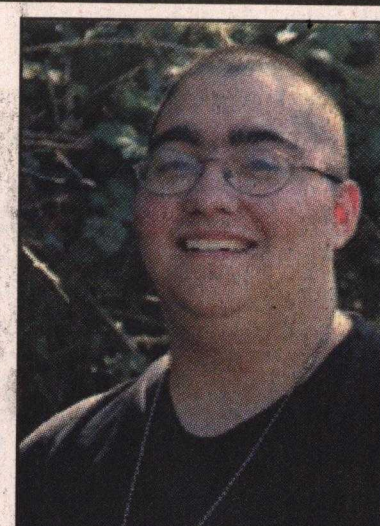
Hernandez



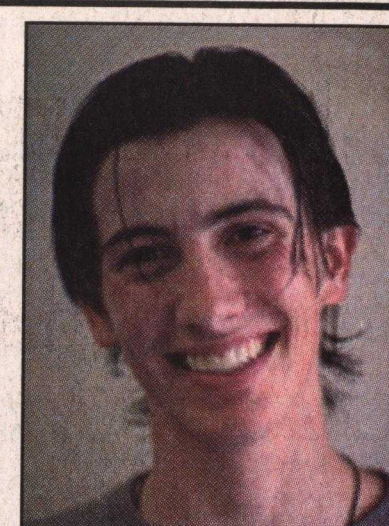
Lorenzana



Sharpe



West



Wehrman

Youth winners

Nikira Hernandez is a sophomore at Santa Cruz High School and a member of the school's Rainbow Alliance, a gay-straight alliance group. She recently led A day of Silence, a school-wide event in which students were encouraged to not talk for the entire day in order to get a feel for the silence gay youth often feel...

Marisol Lorenzana, a UC Santa Cruz student, is involved in numerous student organizations such as Queers of Color, a group that focuses on retaining gay minority students, MEChA, or the movement into estudantil chicano de atlzalan, Colors in Action, an unlabeled activist group which promotes awareness for issues that are silenced, and the student government. She is also a poet.

Kristen Sharpe is also a UCSC student and has been involved with the gay community since high school at Mt. Carmel High School in San Diego, where she founded the school's gay/straight alliance club. She still volunteers for gay youth resource centers and organizations in San Diego.

During his freshman year at

Scott's Valley High School, Kyle Wehrman decided to organize a gay/straight alliance club at the school. Wehrman, now a sophomore at the school, is now the president of the club and has organized a Hate Free Community campaign, an AIDS Awareness Day and is currently working on a Respect Week project for the campus. The gay/straight alliance, called Unity Through Diversity, now has 35 members and focuses on racial, religious and other diversity issues.

Kevin West, a transgendered female to male, helped organize last year's Transgendered March and Rally on National Coming Out Day in downtown Santa Cruz. He is a Triangle Speaker and a member of many gay organizations. West, 15, is also organizing the Transgendered March again this year.

Ally winners

David Gonzalez is a UCSC graduate and longtime worker at the Santa Cruz AIDS Project. He is also a facilitator for Gay and Proud, a group for youth at Salud Para La Gente in Watsonville.

Carly Berdschensky, who

works for the Group Home Society, helps plan youth-led events like the Transgendered March and the Queen Prom. She also counsels youth in crisis.

Luis Juarez, like Gonzalez, facilitates the Gay and Proud group at Salud Para La Gente. He also works with youth on art projects and other creative activities and facilitates HIV testing and counseling. He is one of the outreach volunteers with the Queer Youth Awards.

Information about ally winners Marcia Stein, Bob Correa and Denny Carroll was not available by press time.

Tami Kittle is a Scotts Valley High School teacher and is one of the advisors of Unity Through Diversity, the new gay/straight alliance at the school started by youth winner Wehrman.

Organizations

Equinox, part of the Santa Cruz AIDS project, was this year's organization winner. It provides a safe place for youth to hang out, get good health information and talk. It offers prevention and intervention services as well as sup-

TICKETS

Tickets are available at these locations throughout the county:

Watsonville:
Salud Para La Gente
204 E. Beach Street
728-0222

Casa BienEstar
90 Mariposa Avenue
761-8595

Soquel:
The Ugly Mug
4046 Soquel Drive
477-1341

Santa Cruz:
Herland Bookstore
1014 Cedar Street
429-6636

Streetlight Records
941 Pacific Avenue
421-9200

Felton:
The White Raven
6253 Highway 9
335-3611

Ben Lomond:
Cloud Nine

port groups. Outings, movie nights and HIV testing. One of the programs, Proud Voices, offers gay youth of all genders a place to talk openly.

Organization nominees

El Nuevo Arcoiris, a youth organization based at Salud Para La Gente, offers a place for gay Spanish-speaking youth over 18 years old to meet. This is the group's first

year. T offers discussion groups, dances and local community celebrations. It meets every Thursday from 7 to 10 p.m. and Salud Para La Gente.

Soquel High School Gay/Straight Alliance was organized three years ago to offer students place to talk about important topics and gather information on local queer youth events. It meets every day at lunch.