

Local teens honored for gay activism

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CRUZ**

When Kristin Sharpe, 19, enrolled in UC Santa Cruz, she wanted to live with other queer students. But since no queer-themed floor existed in her dorm, she did the next best thing: When she applied to be a residential assistant in the dorms her next year, she created Merrill College's first queer-themed undergraduate floor. Now, more than half the students on that floor are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered.

Sharpe calls the floor and the students on it "a family of sorts," but she never imagined that doing that would win her award recognized by everyone from Santa Cruz's mayor to U.S. Rep. Sam Farr.

Farr is sending each winner a letter congratulating them and another letter from Farr will be read at the event. Santa Cruz Mayor Christopher Krohn will declare today "Queer Youth Leadership Day," and each winner will receive a \$500 award.

But now Sharpe is one of five young people who will receive awards from their peers today at the Fifth Annual Santa Cruz County Queer Youth Leadership Awards. Along with Sharpe, Santa Cruz High School sophomore Nikira Hernandez, UCSC student Marisol Lorenzana, Scotts Valley High School freshman Kyle Wehrman and Dewitt Anderson School student Kevin West will also be honored today. Like the other awardees, Sharpe saw a void and filled it.

And now, Sharpe said she sees the award itself filling a void: putting successful young people, who also happen to be gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered, on center stage. Aside from honoring five queer young people, today's ceremony will honor seven adult or straight "allies" of the youth and include a variety show where young people will sing, dance and read poetry.

"What they're trying to do is reshape the stereotypes about queer youth," she said. "Yes, queer youth have a higher rate of suicide and drop out of school more often, but these awards show how far we as a community have come. It honors queer youth who have made it their mission to take a stand on the issues and who are being successful at it."

Like Sharpe, Nikira Hernandez, 15, attended last year's queer youth awards. Hernandez won for her local and national activism. She was one of a half-dozen youth organizers of the National Day of Silence, a day in which students agreed to take an eight-hour vow of silence to show how silenced gay teens feel every day. She also helps organize her school's gay-straight alliance and works with a countywide gay youth group.

But last year when she attended, she said she had no idea she'd be back this year as a recipient.

"I went last year and looked at everyone who was doing such amazing things, and I thought, 'Gee, some day I'd like to be up there,'" she said. "And now I won! It's so great."

Kevin West, 16, has only lived in Aptos for about a year now, moving from a Stockton group home after Child Protective Services removed him from his abusive family. But already, he said he sees the county as far more accepting of diversity. Living here has been key for him coming out as a female-to-male transgendered person. In fact, it was at last year's queer youth awards that he met another transgendered person, whom West describes as a "brother." West has taken his newfound identity and organized the county's first transgendered rights march. The march happened on National Coming Out Day, Oct. 11 last year, attracting 70 adults and youth. West is already planning next year's march.

Marisol Lorenzana is a poet and UCSC student who is active in campus queer youth organizations, including UCSC Queers of Color and MEChA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Atzlan). She was unavailable for comment this week.

Kyle Wehrman, 15, helped organize Scotts Valley High School's first gay-straight alliance this year and is the 35-member group's president. Calling it Unity Through Diversity, Wehrman's goal is to raise awareness at the school about all kinds of differences. He has helped organize an AIDS Awareness Day and is working on a week of tolerance-oriented events called Respect Week. He was unavailable for comment this week.

The Fifth Annual Queer Youth Leadership Awards Ceremony and Variety Show will take place at 7:30 tonight at the Loudon Nelson Community Center Auditorium, 301 Center St., Santa Cruz. Tickets are \$25 for adults and \$0-\$10 for youth and available at the door.

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