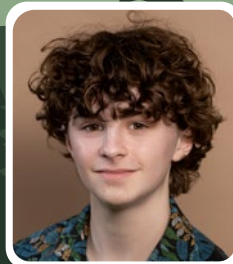
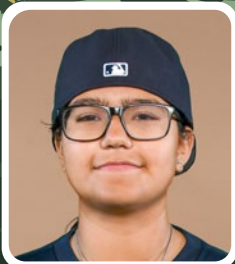
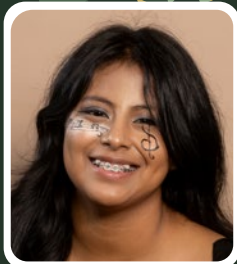
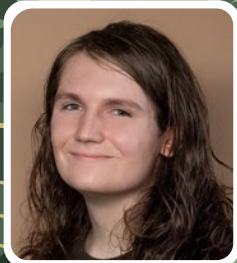
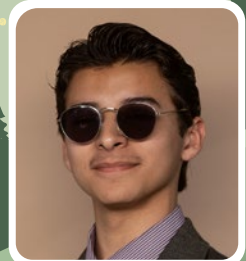
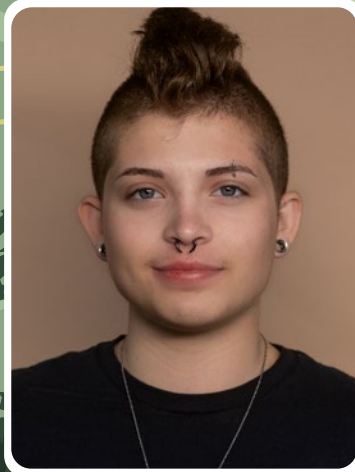
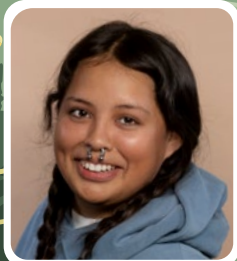
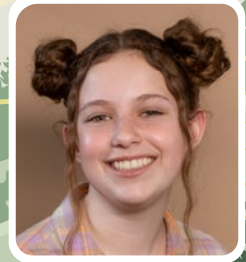


29th Annual
**QUEER YOUTH
LEADERSHIP AWARDS**

Honoring Queer Youth Leaders & Allies in Santa Cruz County



*Saturday, May 9th, 2026
Pajaro Valley High School, Watsonville*





CONGRATULATIONS

2026 Queer Youth Leaders

Scan for local resources for our immigrant and 2SLGBTQIA+ community.



Congratulations to all of the nominees and awardees of the 29th Annual Queer Youth Leadership Awards.

Your leadership, creativity, and courage continue to inspire our entire community.

At the Santa Cruz County Behavioral Health Division, we remain deeply committed to ensuring that every young person and family has access to compassionate, culturally responsive mental health care—no matter who they are or how they identify. Our diversity strengthens us, and we are proud to support and celebrate the brilliance that LGBTQ+ youth bring to Santa Cruz County.

Caring for our mental health is a vital part of caring for our whole selves, and it is also essential to the wellbeing of our community. To our LGBTQ+ youth: please know that we see you, we value you, and we stand with you. We are here whenever you need us. Thank you for helping lead the way!

Dr. Marni R. Sandoval
Santa Cruz County Behavioral Health Director

COMMUNITY RESOURCES

Santa Cruz County Access Team ☎1-800-952-2335

Get connected to mental health support in Santa Cruz County. Walk-in crisis services are available Mon.-Fri., 8:00AM to 4:00PM:

- 1400 Emeline Ave. Bldg. K, Santa Cruz
- 1430 Freedom Blvd. Ste. F, Watsonville

Hope Forward Youth Crisis Center

A safe and inclusive space that provides short-term, intensive support for youth experiencing mental health crises. Available 24/7.

☎ 831-540-4141 🌐 santacruzhealth.org/YouthCrisis
5300 Soquel Avenue, Santa Cruz, CA 95062

Santa Cruz County Mobile Crisis Response Team

24/7 In-person crisis support services for all Santa Cruz County.

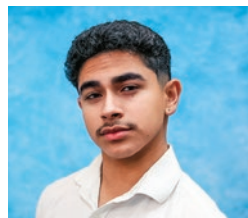
☎ 800-952-2335 🌐 santacruzhealth.org/CrisisResponse

santacruzcountyca.gov/sanctuary

@CountyofSantaCruz

Celebrating 29 years...

of Queer Youth Leadership Award nominees and their allies, past and present!



Since 1997, the Diversity Partnership Fund at the Community Foundation has invested over \$1.7 million in local causes that promote inclusiveness and social justice to better the lives of LGBTQ+ people in our community, now and for future generations.

COMMUNITY FOUNDATION
SANTA CRUZ COUNTY

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QUEER YOUTH LEADERSHIP AWARD

Recognizing the leadership of fifteen LGBTQIA2S+ youth for their incredible accomplishments and contributions to their schools and greater communities.



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ALLY TO QUEER YOUTH AWARD

Acknowledging the leadership of nine allies for making significant contributions to improving the lives of LGBTQIA2S+ youth and their families.



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ORGANIZATIONAL ALLY TO QUEER YOUTH AWARD

Recognizing six organizational allies that have made significant contributions to improving the lives of LGBTQ2S+ youth and the Santa Cruz County community.



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JUDGING FACILITATORS & JUDGES

A big thank you to our prestigious judging facilitators and judges for taking the time and careful consideration to award four queer youth leaders, one ally, and one organizational ally.



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FINAL RECOGNITIONS & RESOURCES

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Recognizing our Co-sponsors & Supporters
Student Rights, Advocacy & Community Resources
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PRONOUNS GUIDE

Gender affirmative pronouns are the set of pronouns that a person identifies with and would like to be called when their proper name is not being used. Some individuals may use more than one set of pronouns, and pronouns may change over time. With the inclusion of new pronouns or neopronouns, there are many pronouns in addition to the familiar she, he and they.

A person's pronouns are not "preferred", as this implies it is not necessary to use their designated pronouns. Not using the requested pronoun, or misgendering, is disrespectful, and can cause emotional harm. Similarly, one should never tell another person that their pronouns are "incorrect." Using the correct pronoun for someone affirms that you see them as the same gender that they see themselves, and that you respect their identity. Research shows that using a person's accurate pronouns is one of the most powerful ways to support a person and promote their wellbeing.

If you make a mistake, don't panic! Apologize, correct yourself, and continue the conversation. Try not to dwell on it or over apologize as this may bring more unwanted attention to the mistake. It may be considerate to apologize privately later. It helps to slow down so as to be able to use the correct pronoun. If you are unsure about how to use someone's pronoun, it is always better to ask than to make an assumption.

Here are some suggestions for ways to share and ask about someone's pronouns:

- Offer your name and pronouns in your introduction before asking for theirs: "What pronouns do you use?"
- Add your pronoun to name tags or badges; wear a pronoun button
- Include your pronouns with your signature on emails, and your name on virtual platforms, like Zoom

We celebrate that the singular pronoun "they" is officially grammatically correct. The *Washington Post's* style guide ratified the usage of "they" in 2015. *Post* copy editor Bill Walsh explained that the singular they is "the only sensible solution to English's lack of a gender-neutral third person singular personal pronoun." In 2019, "they" was designated Word of the Year by Merriam-Webster, "marking the rise of the use of the venerable plural pronoun to refer to a single person whose gender is non-binary." (*New York Times*, Dec 10, 2019).

While "he" has been considered a masculine pronoun and "she" a feminine pronoun, both pronouns can be used by all genders. They are not restricted in any way to the gender binary, and many non-binary individuals will use one or both, often in addition to "they". Some people do not use pronouns, and just use their first or last name, or a part of their name, in place of a pronoun.

An explosion of new pronouns or neopronouns are being created as individuals develop language to describe their authentic identity and/or gender experience. Some examples of common neopronouns are: **ae/aer, ey/em, shi/hir, hi/hem, vey/ver, fae/faer, kye/kyr, ze/zir, xe/xem.**

PRONOUN CONJUGATION CHART

from The University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee's LGBTQ+ Resource Center

Note: the first column is meant to indicate two separate – but similarly spelled – sets of pronouns. They are ae/aer/aers and fae/faer/faers.

(f)ae	e/ey	he	per	she	they	ve	xe	ze/zie
(f)aer	em	him	per	her	them	ver	xem	hir
(f)aer	eir	his	pers	her	their	vis	xyr	hir
(f)aers	eirs	his	pers	hers	theirs	vis	xyrs	hirs
(f)aerself	eirself	himself	perself	herself	themselves	verself	xemself	hirself

If you would like more information on pronouns, the University of Wisconsin's website uwm.edu/lgbtrc/support/gender-pronouns is excellent, and pronouns.org is another helpful reference. For additional practice, go to practicewithpronouns.com or minus18.org.au/pronouns



AWARDS CEREMONY PROGRAM

OPENING MONTAGE & ELDER'S WELCOME

Celebration of Queer Youth Nominees

WELCOME

SUPERVISOR FELIPE HERNANDEZ

Fourth District Supervisor for Santa Cruz County



QYLA 2026 THEME

Pajaro Valley High School Sexuality and Gender Alliance (SAGA) & Associated Student Body (ASB)

HONORING QUEER YOUTH LEADERSHIP AWARD

Nominees



QUEER YOUTH LEADERSHIP AWARD

Awardee Jasper Albrecht

CLEARING OF HANDS ACTIVITY

QUEER YOUTH LEADERSHIP AWARD

Awardee Everest Vasquez



HONORING ALLY TO QUEER YOUTH AWARD

Nominees

ALLY TO QUEER YOUTH AWARD

Awardee Andrea Damon



QUEER YOUTH LEADERSHIP AWARD

Awardee Nayela Soledad Reynoso

HONORING ORGANIZATIONAL ALLY TO QUEER YOUTH

Nominees

ORGANIZATIONAL ALLY TO QUEER YOUTH

Awardee Santa Cruz Community Health (SCCH)



QUEER YOUTH LEADERSHIP AWARD

Awardee Ash R. Immoor

PERFORMANCE

Renegade Theater Co.

FINALE



QUEER YOUTH TASK FORCE MESSAGE



29TH ANNUAL QUEER YOUTH LEADERSHIP AWARDS

May 9, 2026

WHAT IS THE QYTF?

Comprised of individuals and organizations, the Queer Youth Task Force of Santa Cruz County (QYTF) has worked with and supported LGBTQIAS+ youth for 29 years. Our goal is to improve the quality of life for all LGBTQIAS+ youth and families in our community.



P. O. Box 3143
Santa Cruz, CA 95063



(831) 427-4004



QYTF.org



info@QYTF.org

WELCOME!

Thank you for attending the 29th Annual Queer Youth Leadership Awards. Tonight the Santa Cruz County community comes together to celebrate and recognize some of today's young Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, and Two-Spirit (LGBTQIA2S+) leaders and their individual and organizational allies. The Queer Youth Task Force of Santa Cruz County (QYTF) is proud to welcome you to this year's awards ceremony. Please join us in recognizing all the nominees for the following award categories: the Queer Youth Leadership Award, the Ally to Queer Youth Award, and the Organizational Ally to Queer Youth Award.

QYLA has been many things to many people. QYLA is about gathering as a community, bearing witness, visibility, celebration, raucous applause, and, above all, an outpouring of love. We thank our trailblazers for helping us get as far as we are today, and as we look to the future, we know there is still so much more to be done. We will work to continue inspiring youth leaders, allies, and organizations to create positive change for the LGBTQIA2S+ community for the next 29 years and beyond.

Thank you to the many volunteers and sponsors of QYLA!

Core Production Team of the 2026 Queer Youth Leadership Awards



BIENVENIDOS!

Gracias por asistir a la 29ª edición de los Premios Anuales de Liderazgo Juvenil Queer. Esta noche, la comunidad del condado de Santa Cruz se reúne para celebrar y reconocer a algunos de los líderes jóvenes lesbianas, gays, bisexuales, queer, en duda, intersexuales, asexuales y de dos espíritus (LGBTQIA2E+) y sus aliados individuales y organizacionales. El Grupo de Trabajo de Jóvenes Queer del Condado de Santa Cruz (QYTF) se enorgullece en darle la bienvenida a la ceremonia de premiación de este año. Únase a nosotros al reconocer a todos los nominados para las siguientes categorías de premios: el Premio al Liderazgo de la Juventud Queer, el Premio Aliado a la Juventud Queer y el Premio Aliado Organizacional a la Juventud Queer.

QYLA ha sido muchas cosas para muchas personas. QYLA se trata de reunirnos en comunidad, dar testimonio, visibilidad, celebración, estruendosos aplausos y, sobre todo, una efusión de amor. Agradecemos a nuestros pioneros por ayudarnos a llegar tan lejos como estamos hoy y, al mirar hacia el futuro, sabemos que aún queda mucho por hacer. Trabajaremos para continuar inspirando a líderes juveniles, aliados y organizaciones para crear un cambio positivo para la comunidad LGBTQIA2E+ durante los próximos 29 años y más.

¡Gracias a los muchos voluntarios y patrocinadores de QYLA!

Equipo de Producción Central de los Premios al Liderazgo Juvenil Queer 2026

SUPERVISOR FELIPE HERNANDEZ MESSAGE



County of Santa Cruz

BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

701 OCEAN STREET, SUITE 500, SANTA CRUZ, CA 95060-4069
(831) 454-2200 FAX: (831) 454-3262 TDD/TTY - Call 711

MANU KOENIG
FIRST DISTRICT

KIMBERLY DE SERPA
SECOND DISTRICT

JUSTIN CUMMINGS
THIRD DISTRICT

FELIPE HERNANDEZ
FOURTH DISTRICT

MONICA MARTINEZ
FIFTH DISTRICT

May 9, 2026

Dear students, families, educators, and community members,

Welcome to the 2026 Queer Youth Leadership Awards! It is an honor to join you in celebrating the young leaders, allies, and organizations making a meaningful impact across Santa Cruz County. Tonight recognizes LGBTQ+ youth who are helping build stronger, more inclusive communities.

I am especially proud to welcome you to Watsonville and to see this year's event hosted at Pajaro Valley High School. Bringing this celebration to South County is significant—it reflects the strength of this community and the importance of ensuring all young people have access to support, visibility, and opportunity.

At Santa Cruz County, we are committed to backing that commitment with action. Last year, the Board of Supervisors approved \$200,000 in emergency funding to support immigrant families and the LGBTQ+ community—expanding access to mental health services, legal assistance, and peer support programs, including here in South County.

We recognize that more work remains. Gaps in access to LGBTQ+ affirming services persist, particularly in South County, and I remain committed to advancing the resources and protections every young person deserves.

To this year's nominees and award recipients—your leadership matters. You are creating meaningful change and helping others feel seen and supported.

Thank you to the Queer Youth Task Force, Pajaro Valley Unified School District, and all partners, educators, and families who continue to support our youth, and congratulations to tonight's honorees—it is an honor to join you in this celebration.

Sincerely,

Felipe Hernandez, Supervisor
Fourth District

PAJARO VALLEY UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT (PVUSD) WELCOME MESSAGES



WELCOME FROM FROM DR. HEATHER CONTRERAS, PAJARO VALLEY UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT (PVUSD) SUPERINTENDENT

Pajaro Valley Unified School District is delighted to host the 29th Annual Queer Youth Leadership Awards at Pajaro Valley High School! This event shines a bright light on LGBTQIA2S+ youth and the allies who lift them up, celebrate their voices, and champion equity, inclusion, and belonging in our schools and communities across this county.

For nearly 30 years, the Queer Youth Leadership Awards have celebrated young leaders whose courage, creativity, and advocacy inspire positive change in schools, families, and communities. At PVUSD, we are proud to nurture an inclusive environment where every student can thrive, be seen, and feel valued. I am grateful that our students continue to express their needs and desire to improve the world, so everyone feels safe and accepted.

We invite everyone to join us in honoring these remarkable youth and allies whose leadership makes a difference every day. Let us celebrate their courage, passion, and vision while here together in community at Pajaro Valley High School. May this evening be filled with pride, joy, and inspiration for all!

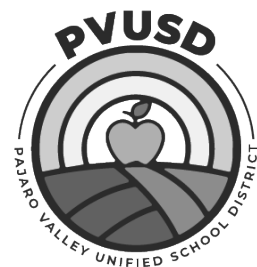


WELCOME FROM FROM DESI SALINAS-HOLZ, PVUSD STUDENT TRUSTEE

As the student trustee for the Pajaro Valley Unified School District, I am beyond proud for our district to be able to host this year's Queer Youth Leadership Awards (QYLA). I myself have attended QYLA since 2016 when I was in second grade. I have been a volunteer, emcee and performer for the event over the past 10 years, and this year is my second year as an Ally to Queer Youth Award nominee.

QYLA and other queer youth events are so important for our LGBTQIA2S+ students as they show that there are others out there who are going through similar experiences and shine a light of hope when our country is sending out the opposite message. The many leaders who are recognized each year at QYLA are the heroes of our schools and community, and their relentless dedication to uplift queer youth makes our world a safer and more welcoming place. Our district takes pride in having many queer and allied students, and in a month we will host our 6th annual Harvey Milk Day Pride Flag raising event.

We look forward to a joyous community experience tonight, May 9th, at Pajaro Valley High to celebrate these powerful voices in our community!





We stand with all our 2SLGBTQIA+ patients,
particularly our TWO-SPIRIT, INTERSEX,
TRANSGENDER & NONBINARY patients.

*Apoyamos a todos nuestros
pacientes 2SLGBTQIA+,
especialmente a nuestros
pacientes DOS ESPÍRITUS,
INTERSEXUALES, TRANSGÉNEROS,
y NO BINARIOS.*

We are committed to providing you with safe
and supportive medical and mental health care
that is gender affirming, in accordance
with California state laws.

*Estamos comprometidos a ofrecer atención médica y cuidado
de salud mental que afirme el género de todos nuestros
pacientes y de acuerdo con las leyes del estado de California.*

Community of Care • Comunidades de Solidaridad

Cabrillo College Student Health Services
Santa Cruz Community Health Centers
UCSC Student Health Center
Watsonville Community Hospital

Santa Cruz County Health Services Agency Health Centers
Santa Cruz County Children's Behavioral Health
Santa Cruz County Adult Behavioral Health
Santa Cruz Health Information Exchange

Antara Institute Wellness and Training Center
Family Service Agency of the Central Coast
Gender Specialist Consult Group of the Central Coast
Santa Cruz County Chapter of the California Association of Marriage and Family Therapists

The Lotus Collaborative Healing Center
Santa Cruz Therapy Collective
Santa Cruz Wellness Center

Leah Adrian, LMFT
Elani Aquino, LCSW
Melissa S. Bernstein, LMFT
Erin Bucci, M.A., LMFT
Thomas Butz, PhD
Victoria Campbell, LMFT
Rone Canyon Gasch, Psy. Assoc.
Kirsten Carraway, Ph.D.
Harper Cheaney, LMFT
Eve Eden, LCSW

Christine Evans, Ph.D.
Jon Girvetz, Ph.D.
Finn Gratton, LMFT, LPCC
Micah Hammond, MA, LPCC
Shane Hill, Ph.D.
Leilani Jefferies, LCSW
Kaleo Kaluhiwa, LMFT
Alan Lamb LCSW
Renée Lion, LCSW
Rabbi Paula Marcus, Temple Beth El

Suzanne K. Nicholas, Ph.D.
Julie Norton, LMFT
Dominique Oster, MA, LMFT
Rev Steve Palmisano, SC Zen Center
Helen Resneck-Sannes, Ph.D.
Nicholas Ross, Ph.D.
Rebecca Roth, LMFT
Debra Sloss, LMFT
Jan Sollom-Brotherton, LMFT
Caro Vitale LMFT

PAJARO VALLEY HIGH SCHOOL WELCOME MESSAGE & QYLA 2026 THEME

Hello everyone, and welcome to the 2026 QYLA, Found in the Forest!

This year's theme is meant to push us to explore elements of chosen families, coming out, building community and connections with one another, and how to continue to be proud of who you are during the trying times we're in. We challenge all of you to reflect on how these topics play a role in the communities we interact with, and what function they occupy in today's society. Our theme is born from the saying, "Are we out of the woods yet?", which essentially means to escape trouble. If you're up to date on the current political climate, you know it's frightening; we go deeper into the dark parts of the forest, and we tend to lose sight of our path and get lost. However, tonight we have found a clearing.

We mustn't forget everything that's going on, but we deserve tonight to enjoy ourselves. Take this moment to breathe, to smile, to remember you're not alone. We are one big family, and we are all in this together. We must show that even when the odds are against us, and we're in the thicket of it all, there will always be a gleam of hope hidden within the trees, and we will continue to live and be proud of who we are. Let's be thankful for tonight and for our nominees. Let's all enjoy this year's QYLA as much as we can! Thank you!

**Pajaro Valley High School Sexuality and
Gender Alliance (SAGA) & Pajaro
Valley High School Associated
Student Body (ASB)**

FOUND IN THE FOREST



AWARDS CEREMONY EMCEES



PHOENIX BLUME-LEASE

he / him / his

Student, Branciforte Middle School

Phoenix Blume-Lease is a sixth grader at Branciforte Middle School. He enjoys baking, geocaching with friends, audiobooks, real books, and theater. Phoenix is involved in his school's GSA Club, the Muskequeers, and the Queer Middle School Improvement Team (Q-MIT) with The Diversity Center and Friday Night Live. He also recently walked the runway for a local fashion program called FashionTeens. He's been volunteering at the Queer Youth Leadership Awards (QYLA) since second grade and is now ready to take the stage at QYLA.



OLIVER PAPPAZISIS

he / him / his & they / them / their

Student, Watsonville Charter School of the Arts (WCSA)

Oliver is excited to be here at the Queer Youth Leadership Awards to celebrate all the nominees and thank everyone who came to support the LGBTQIA2S+ community. Oliver is a talented transgender artist who wants to inspire other queer and trans youth to believe in themselves. As he says, "no matter what, you matter and can achieve great things. Hard work pays off." Oliver enjoys talking with people and making friends, encouraging all attendees to come and talk to them.

AWARDS CEREMONY PERFORMERS



RENEGADE THEATER CO.

Renegade Theater Co. is grassroots non-profit community theater serving Santa Cruz County with teen & adult plays and musicals. We create profound theatrical experiences that allow those involved to grow and learn, and to contribute towards creating a strong and supportive community, both within the company itself and as a part of the greater society that we live in. We believe that art should enhance and enrich the community as a whole by pushing us to think in new ways, and to step outside our comfort zone. From day one Renegade has prioritized uplifting underrepresented voices, particularly from the LGBTQIA+ community and creating safe space for self exploration and expression. We believe in activism through art and in creating revolutionary change in our community through theater. Renegade puts on 6-8 shows each year and hosts a yearly Pride Benefit show in June with all proceeds split between Trans Families of Santa Cruz and our scholarship fund for Queer Youth-Renegade's Rainbow: Casper's Memorial Fund. For more information about who we are, our upcoming shows or ways to support and get involved, go to renegadetheaterco.org

ABOUT QUEER YOUTH LEADERSHIP AWARDS

OUR MISSION

The mission of QYLA is to improve the lives of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, and Two-Spirit (LGBTQIA2S+) youth by increasing the positive awareness of Queer Youth Leadership, and increasing safe and welcoming environments in the home, school, and community. QYLA honors today's queer youth leaders and their allies in three award categories: the Queer Youth Leadership Award; the Ally to Queer Youth Award; and the Organizational Ally to Queer Youth Award.



Creating Change Through Celebration





CELEBRATING QUEER YOUTH & ALLIES SINCE 1998

In April of 1998, Santa Cruz County enjoyed the first Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender (GLBT) Youth Award Ceremony and Banquet at Hobee's restaurant, recognizing queer youth across the county for being leaders within their communities. The event was primarily produced by the grass-roots leadership of a core team of volunteers solicited from the local GLBT Youth Task Force and the wider community. The Youth Awards idea was born out of the Task Force's subcommittee to raise the visibility of queer youth in our county. This annual gala event has been hosted in communities across the county and brings many intersecting identities together in celebration of queer youth, their allies, and all of their achievements.

1998 Hobee's Restaurant, Santa Cruz	2013 Pajaro Valley High School, Watsonville
1999 YWCA Watsonville, Watsonville	2014 New Brighton Middle School, Santa Cruz
2000 Coconut Grove, Santa Cruz	2015 San Lorenzo Valley High School, Felton
2001 Coconut Grove, Santa Cruz	2016 Aptos High School, Aptos
2002 Louden Nelson Community Center, Santa Cruz	2017 Pajaro Valley High School, Watsonville
2003 Henry J. Mello Center, Watsonville	2018 Soquel High School, Soquel
2004 Harbor High School, Santa Cruz	2019 San Lorenzo Valley High School, Felton
2005 Santa Cruz High School, Santa Cruz	2020 Live Stream
2006 Henry J. Mello Center, Watsonville	2021 Live Stream
2007 Harbor High School, Santa Cruz	2022 Watsonville High School, Watsonville
2008 New Brighton Middle School, Santa Cruz	2023 New Brighton Middle School, Capitola
2009 Scotts Valley High School, Scotts Valley	2024 Scotts Valley High School, Scotts Valley
2010 New Brighton Middle School, Santa Cruz	2025 Soquel High School, Soquel
2011 San Lorenzo Valley High School, Felton	2026 Pajaro Valley High School, Watsonville
2012 Shoreline Middle School, Santa Cruz	

QYLA LEGACY PROJECT

OUR MISSION

The intention of the QYLA Legacy Project is to document a unique organization that has continued for 29 years—an organization that honors, inspires and provides a platform for queer youth and their allies. We hope to include former awardees and nominees in the project, highlighting their experience with the QYLAs and where they are now. We also hope that this project can be used to educate the general public about the resiliency, heart, and activism of the queer youth of Santa Cruz County and their allies.



BE A PART OF IT!

So much has changed since 1998, but there is still so much work to be done. The Project will honor the progress QYLA awardees and nominees have made, while at the same time bringing attention to what's next.

QYLA has preserved all of the original bios and video footage previous awards, including news articles, video interviews with awardees and nominees, photographs and QYLA programs — documenting the over 700 nominees in the history of QYLA.

If you would like to be part of the QYLA Legacy Project, please contact us!

-  QYLA.org/legacy
-  legacy@QYLA.org
-  (831) 427-4004
-  Facebook.com/QYLALegacyProject

UNSUNG HEROES

As we celebrate and recognize tonight's young LGBTQIA2S+ leaders, we must pause to recognize that they are only a fraction of the LGBTQIA2S+ youth within Santa Cruz County. Due to fear, intolerance, and bullying, many LGBTQIA2S+ youth are closeted and invisible to the LGBTQIA2S+ community.

These "unsung heroes" are working to end homophobia and transphobia, and they are struggling daily to live a life free from bullying. Although they are not able to be here tonight, we must acknowledge their presence within our community and we must learn from their stories and the stories of today's awardees and nominees that there is more work to do.

On behalf of the Queer Youth Leadership Awards, we wish to recognize all of the unsung heroes across Santa Cruz County who, despite all obstacles, are continuing to live true to themselves.



ZOE LOFGREN

DEMOCRAT FOR CONGRESS
DEMÓCRATA PARA EL CONGRESO

"In too many communities across our country, LGBTQ youth are under attack. At a time when young people should feel safe, supported, and empowered, they are instead being targeted simply for being who they are.

Every young person deserves a space where they can thrive — where they are free to be their authentic selves and grow into the leaders our communities need.

Our diversity is our strength. LGBTQ youth bring invaluable perspectives and lived experiences that make our society more compassionate, more understanding, and more vibrant.

I am incredibly proud of the work being led by the Queer Youth Task Force in Santa Cruz County. And to all of the QYLA awardees — congratulations. Your leadership matters. Your voices matter. Keep showing up, keep leading, and keep building a better future for all of us."

-- Congresswoman Zoe Lofgren



**BE STRONG.
BE RESILIENT.
BE OUTSPOKEN.
BE LEADERS.
BE YOU!**

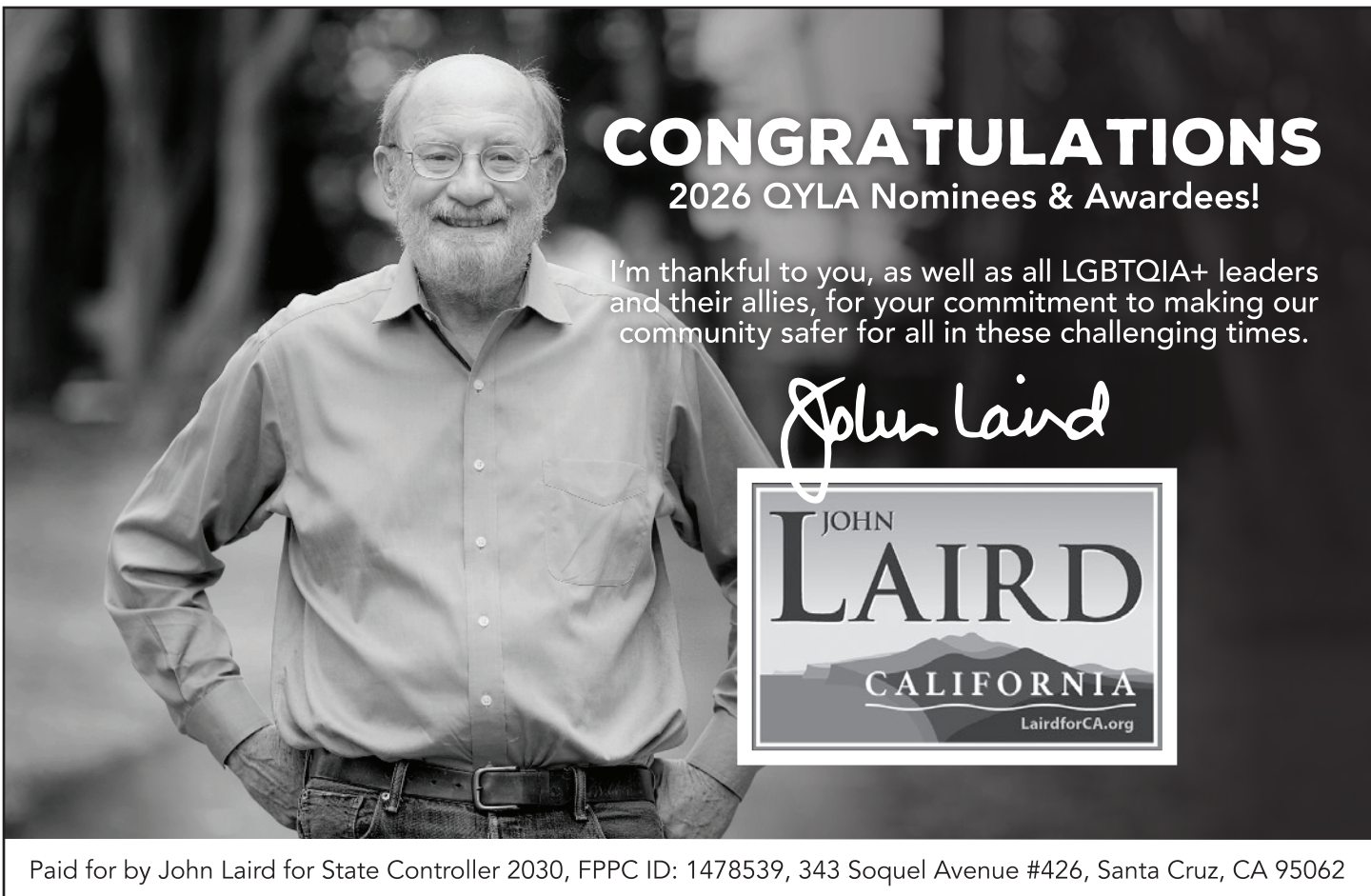
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**JIMMY
PANETTA**
for CONGRESS

Congratulations to this years QYLA Nominees & Awardees!

AUTHORIZED BY JIMMY PANETTA FOR CONGRESS | P.O. BOX 103, CARMEL VALLEY, CA 93924 | FEC# C00592154



CONGRATULATIONS
2026 QYLA Nominees & Awardees!

I'm thankful to you, as well as all LGBTQIA+ leaders and their allies, for your commitment to making our community safer for all in these challenging times.

John Laird

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Paid for by John Laird for State Controller 2030, FPPC ID: 1478539, 343 Soquel Avenue #426, Santa Cruz, CA 95062



2026 QUEER YOUTH LEADERSHIP AWARD

Designed to honor the leadership of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, and Two-Spirit (LGBTQIA2S+) young people throughout Santa Cruz County.

Four awardees will receive a cash award of \$300, as well as the opportunity to designate a queer youth friendly project or nonprofit organization in their community to receive a \$700 donation.

Given annually to queer youth who are 12 to 18 years of age to acknowledge their accomplishments and the contributions they have made to their communities, whether this be in their homes, schools, religious institutions, athletic or academic teams, or other social groups.

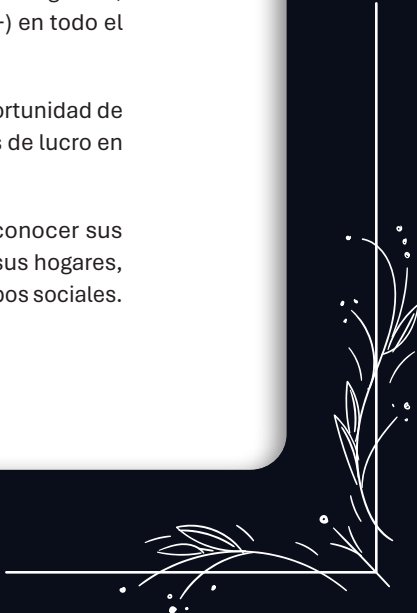
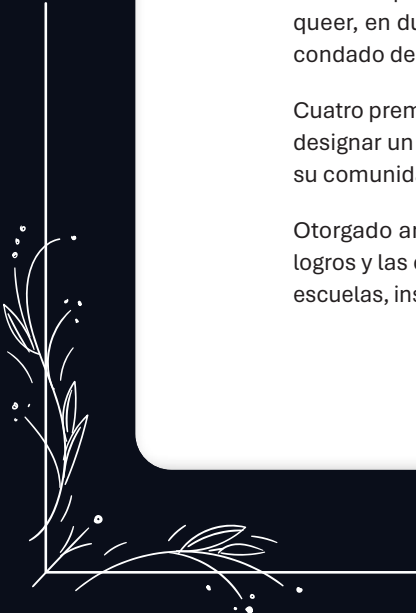


PREMIO AL LIDERAZGO JUVENIL QUEER

Diseñado para honrar el liderazgo de los jóvenes lesbianas, gays, bisexuales, transgénero, queer, en duda, intersexuales, asexuales, y de dos espíritus (LGBTQIA2E+) en todo el condado de Santa Cruz.

Cuatro premiados recibirán un premio en efectivo de \$300, así como la oportunidad de designar un proyecto amigable para jóvenes queer u organización sin fines de lucro en su comunidad para recibir una donación de \$700.

Otorgado anualmente a jóvenes queer de 12 a 18 años de edad para reconocer sus logros y las contribuciones que han hecho a sus comunidades, ya sea en sus hogares, escuelas, instituciones religiosas, equipos atléticos, académicos u otros grupos sociales.





ASH R. IMMOOR | AWARDEE

he / him / his

Student, El Nido School | Student Trustee, Santa Cruz County Board of Education

A student at El Nido High and a Student Trustee on the Santa Cruz County Board of Education, Ash has emerged as a profound leader and advocate for improved LGBTQIA2S+ inclusion, respect, and outreach. At his first Community Outreach and Legislative meeting, Ash proposed that the United Against Hate Resolution be expanded to include bullying as a form of hate. The long-standing adult committee agreed, and after Trustee Immoor created and presented the motion, it was quickly and unanimously adopted. As the first student trustee to attend the board's annual retreat, he also changed the course of discussions, raising concerns about board performance and pushing them to consider more inclusive language, especially regarding students with academic disabilities or challenges. Trustee Immoor has also worked to improve student outreach initiatives, personally visiting several Alternative Education schools, speaking with students about common issues they've faced, and relaying their experiences to the board. A proud trans youth representative, Ash has advocated for gender affirming care at Sacramento's Advocacy Day and served on the "Why YOU Should Care About Gender Affirming Care" panel, emphasizing the importance of affirming care, from medical intervention to respecting one's pronouns.



EVEREST VASQUEZ | AWARDEE

any pronouns

Student, Harbor High School | Member, Queer Student Union (QSU)

A student and steadfast leader at Harbor High, Everest cares deeply for their peers and queer community, demonstrating a unique and transformative blend of quiet strength and fierce conviction. He consistently shows up ready to make a difference, uplifting peers with affirmations, providing project support, and promoting queer visibility with his designs. As a leader in QSU, Everest designed two of their logos and is currently developing a Queer Youth Survival Guide, a resource intended to support LGBTQIA2S+ students with tools, guidance on bullying, historical context, and peer empowerment. She also played a pivotal role in creating QSU's School Climate & Inclusion Survey, transforming abstract concerns into actionable data on student safety and shaping county-wide policy discussions. A youth panelist at the LGBTQ+ Symposium, Everest also spoke publicly on complex topics regarding school environments. Their advocacy has even led them to offer public comment on federal legislation regarding gender-affirming care and, more recently, speak with Sacramento state representatives in support of inclusive LGBTQIA2S+ policies. Everest's unwavering vision and heartfelt advocacy for a more equitable world make them an exemplar of what it means to lead today and into the future.



JASPER ALBRECHT | AWARDEE

they / them / their & he / him / his

Student, Cypress High School | Member, Gender & Sexuality Alliance (GSA) Club

Jasper is a student leader and advocate at Cypress High School who embodies actionable activism, fiercely protecting student rights regardless of race, gender, or sexual orientation. If a fellow student is being treated unfairly or discriminated against, Jasper doesn't hesitate to speak up, even if they are the only voice, demonstrating an inspirational fearlessness. Overcoming his own challenges with mental health and mobility, Jasper has been there for other students, listening with an open heart, offering support and validation, and advocating for change, whether it's instilling confidence and self-worth in others or making the campus more wheelchair accessible. For the past two years, Jasper has been a leader in GSA, facilitating meetings, planning events, managing logistics, creating flyers, and organizing discussions to help students process today's political climate and national issues, including the Supreme Court's ruling to sustain a ban on gender-affirming care for minors. Jasper was also essential in organizing events like Coming Out Day, the Gender Affirming Clothing Swap, and the more somber Transgender Day of Remembrance. Jasper is a powerful activist whose intellect, empathy, and leadership have benefited and will continue to positively impact their local and national community.



NAYELA SOLEDAD REYNOSO | AWARDEE

he / him / his & they / them / their

Student, Anzar High School | Intern, The Diversity Center | Founder, Queer Straight Alliance (QSA) Club | Founder, Pride Club | Member, Queer Student Union (QSU)

Soledad is a powerful student leader at Anzar High School whose courage, creativity, and deep care for his community are not only helping build safe, affirming spaces for others but also actively shaping a more visible and joyful future for queer youth. As the founder and leader of Anzar's QSA and Pride Club, Soledad took the initiative to organize outreach and events, such as The Trevor Project fundraiser, to ensure students have access to queer-affirming spaces and representation. An intern at The Diversity Center, Soledad is also responsible for designing the cover art for *The Rainbow Reader* magazine, volunteering at senior luncheons to provide care and connection to LGBTQIA2S+ elders, organizing and moderating a queer author event, and, as a member of the Queer Prom Planning Committee, helping select themes for the queer proms. Soledad has also co-facilitated youth workshops at the Rainbow Conference, attended the Queer Youth Summit as a workshop leader, helped develop a Queer Youth Survival Guide as a member of QSU, and contributed to the MAH's *Threads of Love* exhibit. Soledad models the power of living authentically and unapologetically as a trans activist, fearlessly stepping into leadership roles and relentlessly advocating for queer visibility, inclusivity, and representation.



AALIYAH A. ARELLANO | NOMINEE

she / her / hers

Student, Watsonville High School

Aaliyah is a dedicated and hardworking student at Watsonville High School whose positive energy and willingness to help others have made her a strong role model amongst her peers. Aaliyah proudly embraces her identity as a gay individual and queer advocate, inspiring others to be their authentic selves. Aaliyah collaborates with classmates, communicates effectively, and dedicates herself fully to projects. A student in the automotive program, she's also never afraid to get her hands dirty, confidently taking apart and working on small engine components. Aaliyah's skill and determination have made her an asset and natural leader on the basketball court and in her school's flag football team. As team captain, Aaliyah leads by example, motivating her teammates and directing them through high-pressure situations with a level head and unparalleled determination. Despite facing setbacks, Aaliyah has remained resilient and pushed herself to succeed, turning her challenges into opportunities to persevere and prove her capabilities. Aaliyah is an authentic, self-assured, compassionate student who models how to stand proudly in who you are and create a space where others feel valued and accepted.



BRYCE GROSSMAN | NOMINEE

they / them / their

Student, Santa Cruz High School | Founder, We Will Not Be Erased March

Bryce is a student at Santa Cruz High School as well as a passionate advocate and formidable community leader who not only has the vision to dream of a better world, but the tenacity to build it. In eighth grade, Bryce approached Mission Hill Middle School's principal with a bold proposal: organizing local action for the National Transgender Walkout. While the principal couldn't endorse a school walkout, Bryce, undeterred, spent the following months partnering with local organizations, securing sponsorships, and coordinating a massive coalition that culminated in the We Will Not Be Erased March. The 2025 event saw a massive turnout with Bryce and other inspiring young activists taking the stage to speak on behalf of LGBTQIA2S+ youth and in defense of trans rights. Bryce is also an active leader in their former middle school's GSA club, Santa Cruz High School's Rainbow Alliance Club, and the Superintendent's Advisory on Race and Equity, playing a foundational role in launching a district-wide initiative to eliminate hate speech in schools. Bryce's powerful call for visibility, empowerment, and community strength has demonstrated that leadership is not limited to singular events, but rather a sustained, daily commitment to institutional change.



DESTYNI HUGGINS | NOMINEE

she / her / hers & they / them / their

Student, Branciforte Middle School | Vice President, Muskequeers Student Club

Destyni is a uniquely kind and wise student leader at Branciforte Middle School who listens to others' experiences without judgment and bridges the gap between students and professional support, personally guiding peers to seek help from the counseling office or Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. As the former Secretary and current Vice President of the Muskequeers Club, Destyni has helped promote Queer Skate Night, create and distribute pronoun pins, and construct an educational umbrella for Trans Awareness. She is also a member of the District Race and Equity Committee, advocating to end the use of slurs and proposing ideas to make her school safer at the LGBTQ+ Task Force forum. Destyni is incredibly involved in their school and local community, joining ASB, leading campus tours as a "Beekeeper" or school ambassador, attending creative writing classes, reading poetry at Book Shop Santa Cruz's Out Loud event, contributing to the MAH's *Threads of Love* and *Relationship Green Flags* exhibits, and creating runway-ready designs for the FashionTeens program. Destyni's enthusiastic involvement, intellectual depth, strong work ethic, and empathetic outreach have made them a natural leader and role model at their school and in the wider community.



FARLEY BLACKMUN | NOMINEE

he / him / his

Student, San Lorenzo Valley Middle School (SLVMS) | Member, Gender & Sexuality Alliance (GSA) Club

As a student and leader in San Lorenzo Valley Middle School's GSA Club, Farley has consistently been a model for the community, turning adversity into opportunities for perseverance and positive change. Despite facing challenges, Farley continues to advocate for himself and his fellow students, pushing for greater activism at his school and in the broader community. While his honest leadership helps drive GSA meetings and ensures his classmates remain productive and focused, Farley's heartfelt and enthusiastic involvement is simply infectious. Farley has spearheaded GSA outreach and recruitment efforts and organized events like the Know Your Pride Flag Contest, in which participants learn about different pride flags and spin a wheel to randomly select one they need to describe. Farley also founded the Love is Love Rally—a Valentine's Day event to spread positivity regardless of identity or sexual orientation—securing sponsorships, establishing event dates, and enthusiastically sharing his ideas with community members and classmates until they came to fruition. Farley goes above and beyond every day to create a safe space at SLVMS, fiercely advocating for inclusivity, educating peers and staff, ensuring future generations of LGBTQIA2S+ students are accepted, and inspiring others to do the same.



KATHERINE "KATE" FIGUEROA | NOMINEE

they / them / their

Student, Pajaro Valley High School | Member, Sexuality and Gender Alliance (SAGA) Club

Kate is a natural performer and leader at Pajaro Valley High School who never fails to bring a fun, dynamic, and charismatic energy to every SAGA meeting. Kate began their activism as young as fifth grade when they joined the GSA Junior Club, quickly growing into a core member of their middle school's GSA. During this time, Kate participated in classroom presentations to educate students and staff on how to support the LGBTQIA2S+ community. They led discussions around queer identities, peer education, bullying prevention, respecting one's pronouns, and the importance of promoting queer visibility and displaying pride flags in classrooms. Kate has also been involved in the Queer Youth Leadership Awards (QYLA) for several years, and previously worked with their middle school to host a special reception for nominees and awardees. Their enthusiastic engagement and outgoing nature ensured all attendees felt valued and celebrated, earning them a place on this year's QYLA planning team. Although Kate's identity hasn't always been accepted or respected, their courageous activism, confident style, and proud visibility as a musician and performer will, undoubtedly, continue to have a positive impact on their community and everyone they meet.



MARK, ADEL MENDOZA LUENGAS | NOMINEE

any pronouns

Student, Pajaro Valley High School | Member, Raíces y Cariño PRISM Club

A student at Pajaro Valley High School, Mark, Adel has been involved in social justice activism since middle school, joining QSA and earning the role of Club President by eighth grade. In that time, they led school-wide events like National Coming Out Day and Day of Silence, and bravely presented ways in which their peers and teachers could be good allies. For three consecutive years, they've spoken at the Harvey Milk Day event and, in 2024, spoke at the PVUSD LGBTQ+ Committee meeting about the need for all-gender restrooms, explaining the daily stresses trans and gender diverse students face regarding bathroom safety and use. Mark, Adel has also been an active member and role model in Raíces y Cariño's PRISM Club since its inception, and this year, their leadership, drive, and academic achievement culminated in an invitation to join the prestigious Watsonville Ivy League Project (WILP). Mark, Adel was instrumental in this year's WILP fundraiser, organizing the benefit, recruiting performers, mentoring students about ticket sales and donations, and performing in the show himself as a band musician and folklórico dancer. Mark, Adel is an inspirational leader and dedicated social justice activist whose advocacy has led to better inclusion, understanding, and visibility for the queer community.



MIREYA "MJ" REYNOSO | NOMINEE

they / them / their

Student, Anzar High School | Member, Raíces y Cariño PRISM Club

MJ has grown as a community leader, not only dedicating their creativity, kindness, and support to Anzar High's LGBTQIA2S+ community but also to youth programs across the Santa Cruz, Watsonville, and Monterey Bay areas. Mireya has been involved in The Diversity Center's youth programming for several years, and for the past two years, has served on the Queer Prom Planning Committee, designing posters, creating decorations, and helping set up and break down the Rainbow Realms and Slay the Night Away Queer Proms. They've also volunteered their artistic talent as a member of the Raíces y Cariño PRISM club, designing one of the lotería tablas to be used at Drag shows and Pride Lotería events. MJ's commitment to cultivating environments of inclusion is also evident in their involvement in Monterey County Rainbow Connections programming and in their co-facilitation of youth workshops at the annual Rainbow Conference. MJ has demonstrated their kind leadership skills and unique ability to build joyful, welcoming spaces for LGBTQIA2S+ youth as an attendee at GenderVentures and CampOUT, approaching discussions with open curiosity and actively reaching out to shy or first-time attendees to ensure they feel supported, included, and cared for.



PETRA KING | NOMINEE

she / her / hers & they / them / their

Student, San Lorenzo Valley Middle School (SLVMS) | Member, Gender & Sexuality Alliance (GSA) Club

A student at San Lorenzo Valley Middle School, Petra is a model of compassionate leadership and resilient activism for the community, never hesitating to lend a helping hand to classmates, even to those who would judge her. As an indispensable member and leader in GSA, Petra brings endless enthusiasm while recruiting participants, planning events, and ensuring classmates remain focused during meetings. Despite leading an overworked GSA, Petra's focus, organization, and drive have been crucial to brainstorming, planning, and enacting any GSA task or event. One such event was the Know Your Pride Flag Contest in which students could learn about the different pride flags, spin a wheel, and explain the randomly chosen flag to win a prize. Petra also organized, created signage, and advocated for classmates to attend the Valentine's Day Love is Love Rally, promoting positivity regardless of identity or sexual orientation. They're also responsible for improving and promoting LGBTQIA2S+ visibility as the editor of the school yearbook. Petra consistently steps up to help others, advocates for change, and seeks opportunities to expand the inclusive community beyond SLVMS's campus.



WREN HARMON | NOMINEE

she / her / hers

Student, Santa Cruz High School (SCHS) | Member, Queer Student Union (QSU)

Wren is a thoughtful and engaging youth leader and student at Santa Cruz High School who brings insight and humor to every role she undertakes in the queer community. As a member of QSU, Wren helped create the School Climate & Inclusion Survey, gathering youth perspectives about safety, belonging, and inclusion at local schools. She is also helping create a QSU Queer Youth Survival Guide with tools, guidance, and community resources to support LGBTQIA2S+ students. Wren has demonstrated great initiative and creative leadership as a proud trans woman, assuming a lead role in her school's theatre department and showcasing her talent as a powerful public speaker and storyteller at the first annual LGBTQ+ Symposium, where she bravely shared her personal experiences and challenges navigating school environments. She has also advocated for more inclusive and affirming spaces for the trans community, traveling to Sacramento for California's Advocacy Day and meeting with legislators to discuss and dispute legislation that could negatively impact queer communities and their access to gender-affirming care. Wren's humor, creativity, and courage in the face of adversity make her an inspiring voice among queer youth leaders.



YUDIT "ALEX" RAMOS | NOMINEE

she / her / hers

Student, New School | Junior Staff Member, Food What?!

A student at New School, Yudit quickly established herself as a queer youth advocate and leader at FoodWhat?!, earning her one of the highly competitive Junior Staff positions. Yudit joined the Food What?! Spring program just last year, bringing a unique sense of fun, confidence, and connection to the farm. Yudit demonstrated incredible commitment and drive, completing summer school and, despite missing some team-building moments in the early weeks, entering the Summer Job program with a great attitude and natural leadership skills. Yudit easily sparks conversations with others and is unafraid to voice potentially awkward questions. In doing so, she inspires others to speak out, helps normalize curiosity, and invites genuine conversation in place of shame or stigma. By Fall, Yudit secured a culinary manager position where she flexed her artistic creativity and dedication with skillful recipe creation and presentation. When choosing new peer leaders for the Junior Staff positions, every FoodWhat?! staff member unanimously selected Yudit, confident she would be a beacon of safety for those still exploring their queerness or looking for a place to belong. Yudit is fearless, outspoken, and unapologetically herself, inspiring others to follow her lead and be their authentic selves.



ZOE McMAHON | NOMINEE

any / all pronouns

Student, Branciforte Middle School

A student at Branciforte Middle School, Zoe leads by example, transforming the often-stressful process of finding oneself into a beautiful, celebratory experience. While many feel pressured to have a "final" answer regarding their identity, Zoe champions the journey, normalizing identity exploration and encouraging others to feel safe and confident in their own skin. As a member of the District Race and Equity Committee, Zoe has advocated against hate speech and presented ideas for change at the LGBTQ+ Task Force. Despite facing discrimination herself, Zoe continues to turn adversity into opportunities for education and awareness. Their unwavering kindness and enthusiasm also make them an exemplary student ambassador, providing an open and accepting influence for the next generation. As the previous Secretary and President of the Muskequeers Club, Zoe rallied students and led schoolwide projects like promoting Queer Skate Night, making and distributing pronoun pins, and creating an educational Trans Awareness umbrella. Their creativity and self-expression can also be found in the MAH's *Threads of Love* and *Relationship Green Flags* exhibits, and in the Muskequeers' shirt design. Zoe's leadership is rooted in unrelenting authenticity, proud advocacy, and infectious positivity, acting as a role model for building awareness and taking an active stance against injustice.

CONGRATULATIONS

to the 2026 QYLA Nominees & Awardees!

"Thank you for showing the world how important it is to be true to yourself!"

Gail



GailPellerinForAssembly.com

Paid for by Gail Pellerin for Assembly 2026 | FPPC #1476812
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CONGRATULATIONS

to the Next Generation of Queer Leadership

Celebrating all Youth Leadership
Award Nominees and Recipients



RebeccaStarkPhotography.com 831.325.4183 rebstark@me.com

FROM ALL THE PROUD
PARENTS & GUARDIANS

Congrats!



Dawn ADDIS
STATE ASSEMBLY

CONGRATULATIONS

**to the 2026 QYLA
Nominees and Awardees!**

My deepest gratitude to all
LGBTQIA+ trailblazers and
allies for your unwavering
dedication to creating
a welcoming and safe
community for everyone.

—Dawn

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Congratulations to the 2026 Queer Youth Leadership Awardees and Nominees. Thank you for showing us how impactful it is to live your truth out loud.

My time as a student at Cabrillo College helped shape who I am today. Cabrillo is a welcoming, empowering and affordable way to start your higher education journey. Visit www.cabrillo.edu for more.



Cabrillo College



Adam Spickler, Cabrillo College Trustee
they | them • adspickl@trustee.cabrillo.edu

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- and it is changing everything.*



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Congratulations to all the Nominees!

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**SANTA CRUZ COUNTY'S
NEXT GENERATION OF
LGBTQIA+ LEADERS**

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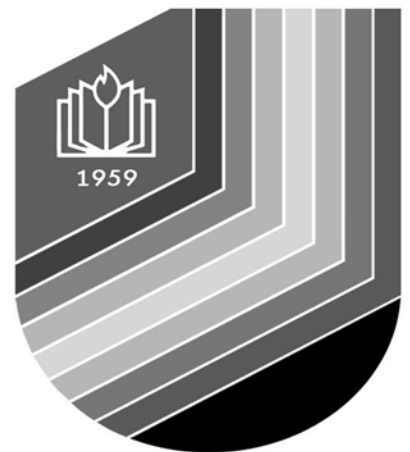
**Cabrillo College congratulates all of
this year's Queer Youth Leadership
Nominees & Awardees!**



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RAINBOW COUNCIL
proud to be part of the
COMMUNITY



**On behalf of Cabrillo College, we
congratulate all of this year's QYLA
Nominees and Awardees!**

Cabrillo, a humanizing place to start your college education!



2026 ALLY TO QUEER YOUTH AWARD

Designed to honor an ally of any age who has made significant contributions to improving the lives of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, and Two-Spirit (LGBTQIA2S+) youth and youth who have LGBTQIA2S+ family members.

One non-monetary award is given.

These awards are for allies who actively work to create safe spaces for Queer Youth. Examples include, creating support groups, increasing visibility of Queer Youth, inviting Queer speakers, or countering Queer oppression by stopping anti-queer slurs.

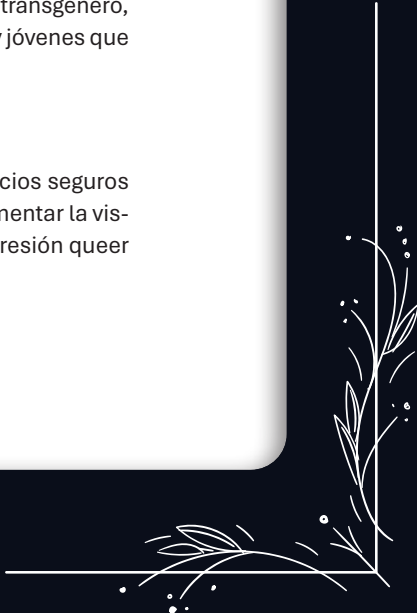
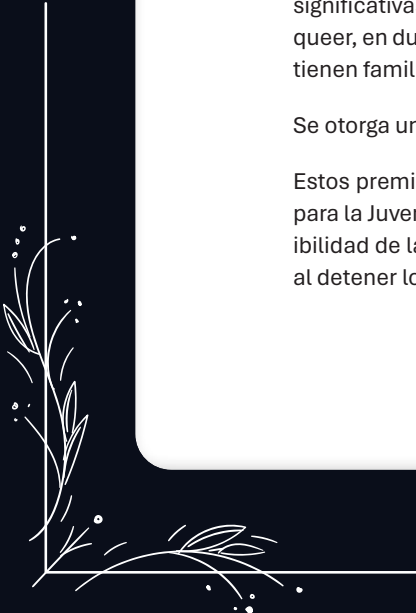


PREMIO PARA ALIADO DE LA JUVENTUD QUEER

Diseñado para honrar a un aliado de cualquier edad que haya realizado contribuciones significativas para mejorar las vidas de jóvenes lesbianas, gays, bisexuales, transgénero, queer, en duda, intersexuales, asexuales, y de dos espíritus (LGBTQIA2E+) y jóvenes que tienen familiares LGBTQIA2E+.

Se otorga un premio no monetario.

Estos premios son para aliados que trabajan activamente para crear espacios seguros para la Juventud Queer. Los ejemplos incluyen, crear grupos de apoyo, aumentar la visibilidad de la juventud queer, invitar a oradores queer o contrarrestar la opresión queer al detener los insultos anti-queer.



**ANDREA DAMON | AWARDEE**

she / her / hers

Associate Director, TransFamilies of Santa Cruz County | Co-organizer, Queer Youth Task Force (QYTF)
Rainbow Conference | Volunteer, Rainbow Defense Coalition

Andrea is a passionate advocate and leader who creates and holds safe spaces for transgender and gender-expansive youth and their families. As Associate Director and Group Facilitator for TransFamilies of Santa Cruz County, Andrea has helped many families understand how to accept, support, and affirm their gender-diverse children. Andrea also co-founded and continues to co-facilitate the Rainbow Kids Circle in Santa Cruz and the bilingual Rainbow Play Group in Watsonville, where kids can socialize with other gender expansive youth and participate in representational activities and story times. Andrea is an integral member of the Rainbow Conference organization team, ensuring the Understanding Gender workshop, an important resource for hundreds of ally attendees, operates smoothly, and stepping in as interim leader of the Rainbow Glitter Kids when last year's elementary track was in danger of being canceled. A volunteer with the Rainbow Defense Coalition, Andrea has also participated in and led safety brigades for Drag Story time readings and other events supporting LGBTQ+ youth. Andrea is a leading advocate whose humility, grace, generosity, and kindness have been a lasting catalyst for gender expansive safety, visibility, and acceptance.

**CHRISTINA SOUZA | NOMINEE**

they / them / their

Socio-Emotional Counselor, Aptos High School | Member, Pajaro Valley Unified School District (PVUSD)
Equity & Inclusion Committee

As a Socio-Emotional Counselor at Aptos High School and Wellness Center Coordinator, Christina has provided individual and group counseling, safety risk assessments, staff development, and school climate and culture campaigns to ensure LGBTQIA2S+ students, staff, and families across Pajaro Valley feel supported and validated. For several years, Christina was a crucial member of the PVUSD and Aptos High LGBTQ+ Task Forces, advocating for queer students and affirming practices within PVUSD. Now a member of the PVUSD Equity & Inclusion Committee and its LGBTQ+ subcommittee, Christina continues to take action, strategizing to improve school conditions and climates, and, ultimately, making their school district a safer and more welcoming place for queer and trans students. The past five years, Christina has also co-organized annual Harvey Milk Day celebrations at both Aptos High and the school district office, planning the events, organizing singing performances, acting as Aptos High's liaison during district meetings, and ensuring students had access to the events. Christina is a trusted, empathetic, and persistent ally who fosters and provides safe spaces for queer and trans students, setting an exemplary standard for being a good ally.

**CONOR O'BRIEN | NOMINEE**

he / him / his

Advisor, Santa Cruz High School (SCHS) Rainbow Alliance

Conor is the advisor for Santa Cruz High School's Rainbow Alliance, providing students with a safe space to be themselves and opportunities to engage civically so they can effect change within their community. Under his guidance, students have planned an annual drag show fundraising for The Trevor Project, overseeing student efforts in organizing participants, finding backstage support and student performers, and learning about drag personas. Conor has also seen firsthand how today's political climate has affected queer and trans youth and made them fear for their future. In response, Conor suggested teachers showcase flags of various nationalities and identities so students would feel safe, included, and represented in the classroom, taking the initiative to collaborate with Safe Schools Project and provide Santa Cruz and Monterey County classrooms with over eight hundred Progress Rainbow flags. In his own words, Conor hopes this symbol of queer visibility and empowerment "helps to alleviate, if any small way, the alienation and fear our students may be experiencing at this time." Conor is a compassionate, inspiring, and devoted ally whose activism ensures queer youth and students feel seen, safe, supported, and celebrated at school.



DESI SALINAS-HOLZ | NOMINEE

he / him / his

Vice President, Watsonville High School Gender & Sexuality Alliance (GSA) Club |
Student Trustee, Pajaro Valley Unified School District (PVUSD) School Board

Now a senior at Watsonville High School, Desi has been a leading voice for LGBTQIA2S+ activism and social justice since he was young, establishing the first elementary school GSA in Santa Cruz when he was in fifth grade. Desi continued his advocacy through middle and high school, speaking at multiple PVUSD board meetings in support of queer youth and Ethnic Studies curriculum, attending the YES Conference for queer youth and allies in San Francisco, and personally thanking the PVUSD board after the conference for sponsoring student transportation. He eventually earned his position as Student Trustee on the PVUSD school board, representing thousands of students and using his platform to advocate for queer, trans, and marginalized communities. Desi also served as GSA President for two years, respectfully stepping down to Vice President this year so a queer-identified student could serve as President, while continuing to help lead meetings, organize events, and conduct outreach initiatives. A mainstay at pride parades and events, Desi never fails to support the queer community, even volunteering to co-emcee last year's Queer Youth Leadership Awards. Desi is the paragon of dedicated, steadfast allyship, tirelessly advocating for queer youth and working to make his school and local community safer.



ELI DAVIES | NOMINEE

they / them / their

Advisor, Raíces y Cariño PRISM Club | Co-Founder, Pajaro Valley for Ethnic Studies and Justice |
Core Leadership, Rainbow Defense Coalition

Eli is a dedicated community advocate and social justice activist who models the importance of showing up for the queer community and improving the lives of LGBTQ+ youth. Eli currently serves as an advisor for the Raíces y Cariño PRISM Club, planning and co-leading meetings, actively engaging with youth, and managing PRISM's social media and communications. They are also an active volunteer and one of four core leaders in the Rainbow Defense Coalition, organizing events, communicating with participants, and training volunteers. Eli is also a co-founder and co-organizer of Pajaro Valley for Ethnic Studies and Justice, a diverse community coalition dedicated to liberatory education and racial justice, founded on restoring ethnic studies curricula to PVUSD. Their involvement in PVUSD board meetings, speaking out about equity, injustice, and standing up for students from marginalized communities, has inspired other students to advocate against discrimination and get involved in social justice activism. As an openly queer & non-binary adult, Eli is an important leader and role model for queer and gender diverse youth, imbuing passion, energy, and humor into every group they join, and volunteering countless hours to ensure queer youth are properly represented, affirmed, and supported.



DR. FARIS SABBABH | NOMINEE

he / him / his

Superintendent, Santa Cruz County Office of Education (COE)

As the Santa Cruz County Superintendent of Education, Dr. Faris Sabbah is a dedicated leader in building an equitable and engaging county for all marginalized groups. Over the years, Dr. Sabbah has ensured the County Office of Education is a leader in supporting LGBTQIA2S+ rights through establishing the COE LGBTQ+ Task Force, establishing sub-committees to include queer and trans youth in school safety plans, raising the Progress Pride flag for Harvey Milk Day at the COE, ensuring his staff receive training on LGBTQIA2S+ issues, providing support and coaching for the first trans Student Trustee on the County Board of Education, and implementing financial reimbursement systems to ensure all students have access to specialized mental health support. Additionally, Dr. Sabbah's support of and continued presence at events like Queer Prom, The Rainbow Conference, Queer Youth Leadership Awards, and Santa Cruz Pride continues to provide steadfast affirmation and a sense of security to our community. With recent national attacks on policies, funding, and staffing in support of queer and trans students and youth, Dr. Sabbah has remained dedicated to authentic allyship, working to end discrimination, creating safer spaces for the queer community, and standing up for those most vulnerable.

**JENNIFER GILL | NOMINEE**

she / her / hers

Teacher, Watsonville Charter School of the Arts (WCSA) | Advisor, Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) Club

As a passionate educator and queer youth ally at Watsonville Charter School of the Arts, Jenn has always made students feel valued, welcomed, and supported, especially if they have a hard time fitting into mainstream environments because of their queer identities or learning differences. Jenn is a talented arts educator and a certified Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) Academic Support Teacher, ensuring gifted students follow specialized curricula that meet their learning needs and goals. Jenn was a strong advocate for WCSA's GSA Club from its inception and, when the former advisor left, she didn't hesitate to step into the role, reviving and saving the supportive, affirming space for generations of queer youth to come. Jenn has also worked with her GSA students to host an annual reception for the Queer Youth Leadership Awards (QYLA), ensuring all nominees and awardees felt celebrated. In addition to volunteering for QYLA, Jenn also stepped in to assist with the Rainbow Conference when an unexpected setback threatened to discontinue 2025's Rainbow Glitter Kids track. Jenn improves the lives of those around her and has made a significant difference for LGBTQIA2S+ students at WCSA and within Santa Cruz County.

**KELLEE MATSUSHITA-TSENG | NOMINEE**

they / them / their & she / her / hers

Farm and Land Stewardship Manager, Food What?! | Co-founder, Bitter Cotyledons

Kellee is a cultural leader and dreamer whose youth advocacy and land stewardship are rooted in their belief that no singular approach will benefit all queer youth. As Food-What?!'s Farm and Land Stewardship Manager, Kellee designed, built, and continues to sustain the program's foundational farm, seamlessly incorporating queer youth inclusion and celebration into their farming lessons. She always approaches discrimination with curiosity instead of shame, working to uproot biases that have normalized homophobic sentiments. Kellee practices and emphasizes the importance of pronoun introductions and guides youth to be curious and care for others with different identities. A patient and deep listener, she takes the time to connect with others, paying close attention to the more silent cues of queer youth to ensure they feel safe and comfortable. They are also a participant in local, regional, and international educational delegations and the co-founder and organizer of Bitter Cotyledons, a gardening collective of queer and trans Asian Americans cultivating resilience through ancestral foodways and community. Kellee gracefully combines land stewardship and mentorship, intersecting lessons of community, cultural identity, queerness, and radical possibility to create a place where all can thrive.

**VERONICA VASQUEZ GUDIÑO | NOMINEE**

she / her / hers

Student, San Jose State University

A first year at San Jose State University studying Psychology and Women's Gender and Sexuality Studies, Veronica is a queer youth leader and ally who supports and provides a sense of belonging to younger queer, trans, and ally youth. Veronica showed great initiative and leadership at FoodWhat?!, participating in activities and ensuring others felt included. An English learner herself, Veronica noticed another youth in the program who was a monolingual Spanish-speaker and, despite her hearing impairment, Veronica skillfully translated conversations and instructions in real time so her friend could participate in farm activities and social circles. Veronica is also very interested in drag costumes and performance, using her own form of self-expression through make-up and fashion to challenge gender norms. With her boundless creativity and ingenuity, Veronica created a very detailed zombie nurse costume that won her the FoodWhat?! Harvest Festival Contest. Veronica is always interested and eager to participate in queer events like Queer Prom, and often invites other queer, trans, and ally youth to join her. A FoodWhat?! Junior Staff candidate, Veronica is a leader who uplifts queer, trans, and ally youth and helps them feel included and seen.

CONGRATULATIONS

2026 QYLA NOMINEES & AWARDEES!

The Santa Cruz County Office of Education is committed to supporting safe and inclusive schools for all LGBTQ+ students, staff and families. Ongoing support includes convening an LGBTQ+ task force with representatives from districts and schools across the county, developing and sharing resources, hosting events such as the annual Rainbow Flag Raising, and providing platforms and support to LGBTQ+ student leaders and allies.



Find out how LGBTQ+ high school students and allies can make their voices heard by joining the Queer Student Union!



sccoe.link/qsu



PVUSD

is **PROUD** to be an inclusive and caring community
with meaningful supports for LGBTQ+ students!!





2026 ORGANIZATIONAL ALLIANCE TO QUEER YOUTH AWARD

Designed to honor an organizational ally who has made significant contributions to improving the lives of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, and Two-Spirit (LGBTQIA2S+) youth and youth in Santa Cruz County.

One non-monetary award is given.

This organization has shown leadership in serving Queer youth.

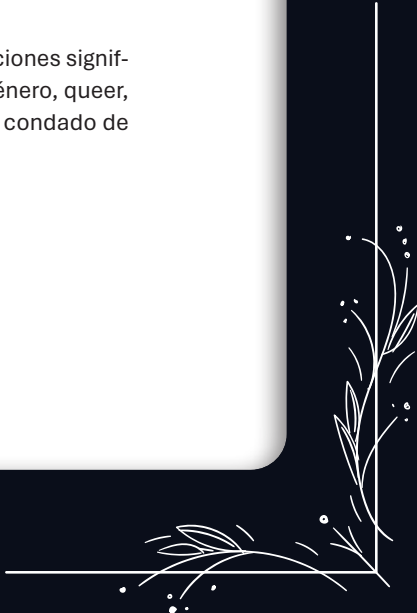
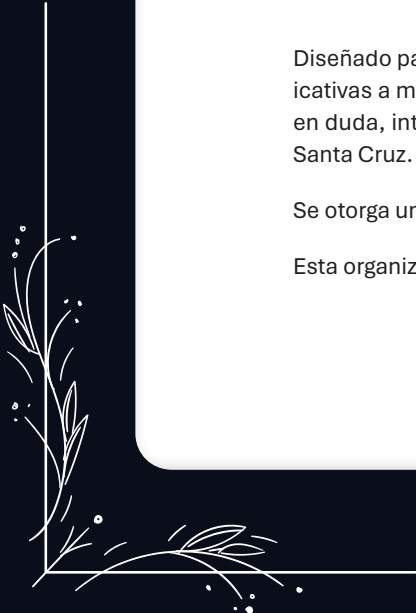


PREMIO ALIANZA ORGANIZACIONAL A LA JUVENTUD QUEER

Diseñado para honrar a un aliado organizacional que haya hecho contribuciones significativas a mejorar las vidas de jóvenes lesbianas, gays, bisexuales, transgénero, queer, en duda, intersexuales, asexuales, y de dos espíritus (LGBTQIA2E+) en el condado de Santa Cruz.

Se otorga un premio no monetario.

Esta organización ha demostrado liderazgo al servir a la juventud Queer.



SANTA CRUZ COMMUNITY HEALTH (SCCH) | AWARDEE



Founded in 1974 by UCSC students dedicated to social justice and health care as a human right, Santa Cruz Community Health (SCCH) began as the Santa Cruz Women's Health Collective. For over five decades, SCCH has met the evolving needs of the community, deepening its impact by expanding the breadth and depth of its services and increasing its locations, with clinics in Santa Cruz, Live Oak and Ben Lomond, and providing behavioral health services in all schools within the Live Oak School District and Harbor High. Today, SCCH serves nearly 14,000 people of all genders and is committed to providing a safe, welcoming, and affirming environment where everyone, including trans youth, can access the care they need, when they need it. In the face of ongoing challenges and external pressures that threaten the well-being and rights of gender-diverse individuals, their team remains unwavering in supporting all patients with compassionate, patient-centered care. Their leadership, providers, and staff continue to advocate for the health and dignity of every person in our community, ensuring that inclusive and affirming care remains available to those who need it. Santa Cruz Community Health stands with the LGBTQIA2S+ youth of Santa Cruz County.

CABRILLO COLLEGE RAINBOW COUNCIL | NOMINEE

The Cabrillo College Rainbow Council comprises LGBTQIA2S+ and allied students, faculty, staff, administrators, and trustees dedicated to improving queer visibility, access, equity, and success across Santa Cruz County. Since its inception in 2020, The Rainbow Council has added to Cabrillo Library's collection of books, periodicals, and films; advocated for the inclusion of historic and contemporary issues in curricula; established faculty and staff professional development workshops; and initiated visibility campaigns throughout the college. They also participate in community initiatives like the Santa Cruz and Pajaro Valley Prides and planned annual school events including Queer Prom, Lavender Graduation, and Trans Day of Remembrance. The Rainbow Council collaborates with Cabrillo's Gender and Sexuality Alliance (GSA) Club to sponsor tables at the Queer Youth Leadership Awards and the Safe Schools Project Student Summit and has worked with the Cabrillo Office of Student Equity and Success and the County Office of Education to establish the 2025 Educators Symposium. For last year's Queer, Trans, and Allied Student Summit, The Rainbow Council also reached out to Cabrillo's student-led Printmaking Club to provide free tote bags filled with swag and hand-printed with a custom logo designed by one of the summit's youth artists.



LAKEVIEW MIDDLE SCHOOL QUEER-STRAIGHT ALLIANCE (QSA) | NOMINEE



The longest continuous middle school Gender & Sexuality Alliance Club in PVUSD, Lakeview Middle School QSA has supported hundreds of LGBTQIA2S+ and allied youth, educated fellow students and staff, hosted community events, and had a positive impact on the school's climate and culture. Lakeview QSA is a leader in the Watsonville community, organizing and inspiring other middle schools to start GSA clubs. During the pandemic, they collaborated with other local students to combine virtual GSA meetings and, when the Pajaro River flooding forced Pajaro Valley Middle School to relocate to Lakeview for over a year, Lakeview QSA welcomed the Pajaro Love With Pride Club, combining their meetings and uniting queer youth and allies from both schools. Lakeview QSA recently celebrated their tenth anniversary, organizing a big party and bringing together students, QSA alumni, current and former Lakeview staff, The Diversity Center staff, and other community allies. They've also helped organize and host the Queer, Trans and Allied Student Summit and the first annual Understanding Gender summit for parents, educators, and adult allies. Lakeview has led by example in PVUSD, bravely flying the pride flag every day despite parent complaints, and inspiring other middle schools to stand up for queer, trans, and gender diverse students.

RAINBOW DEFENSE COALITION OF SANTA CRUZ COUNTY & THE PAJARO VALLEY | NOMINEE

The Rainbow Defense Coalition (RDC) is an all-volunteer organization founded in 2023 to keep the first Watsonville Drag Story Time event safe from hate, discrimination, and protesters. Armed with rainbow flags and umbrellas, the RDC demonstrates queer joy while creating a festive, joyful, and safe atmosphere for those attending community events. The coalition provides ongoing training for volunteers, ensuring they know how to initiate nonviolent communication, de-escalate volatile situations, and defend themselves from harm. With over one-hundred and fifty trained volunteers, the RDC has supported local social justice organizations and responded to over forty LGBTQIA2S+ community events including Drag Story Time, Pride events, Glitter Kids Camp, Queer Prom, Understanding Gender Summit, and The Rainbow Conference. The brigades are free-of-charge and a sustainable response to anti-LGBTQ+ hate in our community. A documentary film about the first Drag Story Time and the origins of RDC was featured in the 2024 Watsonville Film Festival, showcasing the RDC's fearless use of empathy, inclusion, and joy to defend queer youth and organizations from hate.



RENEGADE THEATER CO. | NOMINEE



Now in its third season, Renegade Theater Co. is a welcoming and safe environment for marginalized groups including queer, trans, gender diverse neurodivergent, and low-income theater kids to thrive. Prior Queer Youth Leadership Awardee and now Renegade Theater's artistic director, Kyle Vasquez, creates a space where queer youth can shine and give back to the queer community. When non-binary, Oklahoma teen Nex Benedict died, Renegade took the initiative to perform a reading of *The Laramie Project* to raise funds for Nex's family and the TransFamilies' Understanding Gender Summit. They've continued to perform one Pride benefit show a year, donating half the funds to support LGBTQ+ and gender diverse youth, and, after the tragic death of a beloved production member, established a scholarship so trans and queer teens facing financial difficulties could still attend Renegade Theater. Renegade also hosts the Rainbow Choir — a mixed-voice choral ensemble for teen singers who self identify as intersex, genderqueer, non-binary, or LGBTQIA+ — and they've collaborated with the Seven Directions Creative Learning Center to establish Friday Night LGBTQIA+ Teen Hangouts. From hosting workshops and theater camps to performing queer-centric shows and fundraisers, Renegade has had a vibrant and positive impact not only on the youth participants but on the whole community.

YOUTH EMPOWERMENT & ACTION FOR HEALTH (YEAH!) | NOMINEE

Youth Empowerment and Action for Health! (YEAH!) is a unit within Santa Cruz County Public Health that works to improve the health and well-being of young people and those who support them through youth-adult partnership, collaboration, and coalition-building. YEAH's teams, including Teen Health Outreach (THO), Thriving Youth and Community (TYC), Impaired Driving Prevention, and Friday Night Live (FNL), partner to provide support and educational services for youth across Santa Cruz County. FNL's collaboration with The Diversity Center culminated in the Queer Middle School Improvement Team, a middle school youth council for queer and allied youth, as well as a SOGIE training initiative for parents, educators



and youth serving professionals through the Community Prevention Partners Coalition. Local FNL chapters have included youth-led hate speech prevention projects. YEAH! supports clinics, provides inclusive training, and ensures community surveys follow current SOGIE guidelines so LGBTQIA2S+ data collection is accurate and respectful. As the 2022 Organizational Ally to Queer Youth Awardee, their THO team has provided bilingual, comprehensive, medically-accurate, and inclusive sex education for middle and high school students, a separate parent and adult education courses, and partnered with the Student Summit to offer sessions on *Healthy Relationships and Consent*.

LIKE THIS BOOKLET?

MH
MADDIE HITZEMAN

GRAPHIC DESIGN & MARKETING

maddiehitzeman@gmail.com · maddiehitzeman.wixsite.com/mysite

Congratulations QYLA 2026 nominees & awardees!

*Thank you for making Santa Cruz County
a better place for LGBTQIA+ folks to thrive!*



Birds of a Feather Tutoring

Academic support & mentoring for LGBTQIA+ students
birdsofafeathersantacruz.com ▲ 831-824-4281

**Congratulations to all of the
QYLA 2026 nominees & awardees!**



Valley Churches United

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Felipe ★★
HERNANDEZ
for Supervisor



**Congratulations to all the
QYLA Nominees & Awardees!**

PAID FOR BY: FELIPE HERNANDEZ FOR SUPERVISOR 2026, FPFC: 1462828



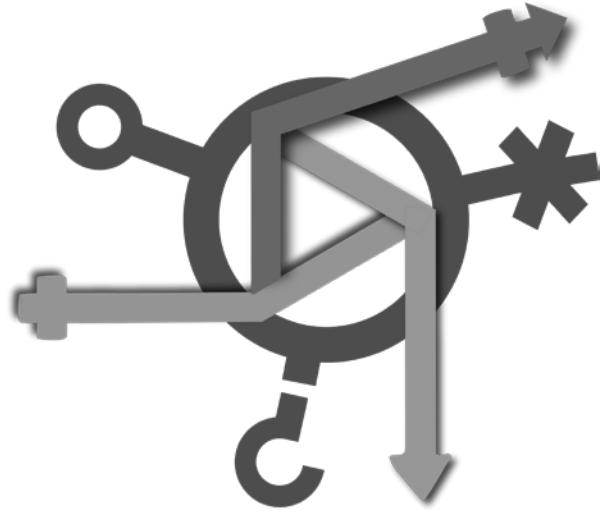
Suicide Prevention Service of the Central Coast

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Congrats QYLA
Nominees & Awardees!

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Trans Teen Project of Santa Cruz County

Resources

TransMentoring Program partnership
with Big Brothers Big Sisters
Visibility Campaign

TransTeenProject.org

SANTA CRUZ PRIDE 2026 UNITE WITH PRIDE

 Congratulations to All the
QYLA Nominees & Awardees! 

Please Join us on Sunday, June 7
for the

**51st Annual Pride Parade and Festival
in Downtown Santa Cruz**



SantaCruzPride.org



A coalition of dozens of local faith communities comprised of Jewish, Christian, Buddhist, Unitarian & non-denominational congregations in Santa Cruz County, promoting full inclusion of LGBT members.

Funded by the Diversity Partnership Fund of the Community Foundation of Santa Cruz County & Temple Beth El / JCC.

Congratulations to the 2026 QYLA Nominees and Awardees!

Celebrating 22 years of love and spiritual engagement at Out In Our Faith!

Out In Our Faith

Please contact us if your community is interested in becoming part of Out In Our Faith.

OutInOurFaith@gmail.com



Temple Beth El

Reform Judaism, Santa Cruz Style
Jewish Community Center Aptos, California

Temple celebrates all of the QYLA 2026 nominees and awardees —
and all who support our amazing leaders.

QYLA 2027

Volunteer! Be part of the team!



Help plan the 2027 awards
QYLA.org

Congratulations to all the QYLA
Nominees & Awardees — and
their families & friends

Thank you for your work and
vision to community



QYTF

QUEER YOUTH TASK FORCE
OF SANTA CRUZ COUNTY

QYTF.org / (831) 427-4004 / info@QYTF.org

Congratulations

to all the SCCS Nominees & Awardees

*and to all those working on behalf of LGBTQIA2S+ youth
in Santa Cruz County!*



Santa Cruz City Schools (SCCS)



Being yourself is
one of the bravest
things you can do.

Big Brothers Big Sisters.
OF MONTEREY BAY

Empowering youth in Monterey,
San Benito & Santa Cruz Counties
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ENROLL NOW



IN THESE DIFFICULT TIMES, REMEMBER...

YOU ARE
BRAVER than you **BELIEVE**
STRONGER than you **SEEM**
& **SMARTER** than you **KNOW**

— CHRISTOPHER ROBIN

SCTTRANS.ORG



JEN HASTINGS, MD | JUDGING FACILITATOR

pronouns: Jen

Volunteer Clinical Professor, University of California San Francisco (UCSF) Department of Family & Community Medicine | Physician Consultant Transgender Healthcare

Jen Hastings, MD, is a Volunteer Clinical Professor at the UCSF Department of Family and Community Medicine and was the founder and Director of Transgender Healthcare Services for Planned Parenthood Mar Monte from 2003 to 2018. Jen supported the initial development of the national protocol and guidelines for Planned Parenthood Federation of America. As a queer/genderqueer physician, Jen is involved in research on the reproductive needs and experiences of transgender and gender expansive people in the US, and a national consultant and educator on transgender healthcare, increasing access and understanding.



KATHY CYTRON, LCSW | JUDGING FACILITATOR

she / her / hers

Retired Program Manager, Children's Behavioral Health of Santa Cruz County

Kathy Cytron is a fierce advocate for equality for all, especially those in the LGBTQIA2S+ community. She was at Santa Cruz County Children's Behavioral Health for 27 years and has been recognized by the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors for her leadership in welcoming diversity. Kathy continues to empower and celebrate LGBTQIA2S+ youth and their families. She goes about her work with a smile on her face, love in her heart, and a deep commitment to social justice.



ADAM SPICKLER | JUDGE

they / them / their

Trustee, Cabrillo College

Adam Spickler was elected as a Cabrillo College Trustee in 2018 and re-elected by a wide margin in 2022, where they currently serve as the board's Vice Chair. Adam is also the first openly transgender man elected to public office in California. Additionally, Adam is an elected member of Santa Cruz County's Democratic Party, is an appointee to the Lieutenant Governor's California Transgender Advisory Council, is the governing board Vice Chair of Housing Santa Cruz County, and served as Board President of the Diversity Center from 2010 to 2015. Professionally, Adam is a Senior Analyst and Public Information Officer for the County of Santa Cruz's Human Services Department. Adam and their husband Scotty live near the harbor in Santa Cruz with their rescue dog Juno.



ELAINE JOHNSON | JUDGE

she / her / hers

Executive Director, Housing Santa Cruz County (HSCC) | President, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Santa Cruz County Branch

Executive Director of HSCC, Elaine Johnson has led countywide efforts to advance affordable housing through public education, policy advocacy, and community engagement. With her professional background in criminal law, juvenile dependency, mediation, and nonprofit leadership, Elaine has advocated for equitable, people-centered housing solutions and built broad, cross-sector coalitions. Elaine has seen firsthand how stable housing can restore dignity, unlock opportunity, and transform lives — an experience that's guided her work and shaped her lifelong commitment to justice and community-led change. She's demonstrated the power of community-driven policy change by leading Measure C, a voter-approved initiative to expand local funding for affordable housing. In her words, "community is not an individual responsibility — it is a collective commitment."



ELLIS OLIVAS | JUDGE

they / them / their

Awardee, 2015 Queer Youth Leadership Awards | Graduate, University of California Riverside (UCR) | Student, Cabrillo College

Ellis Olivas was a Queer Youth Leadership Awardee in 2015. As a high school student, Ellis wrote a petition for gender-neutral bathrooms at Scotts Valley High School for the safety of gender variant students, and helped obtain over 200 signatures. Despite the administration's reluctance, they encouraged students not to give up, and a new generation of students completed this project several years later. While studying sociology at UC Riverside, they were an active participant in the LGBT Resource Center's programs. They also shared their experience with UCR's housing administration as they revised the housing application process to make it more gender inclusive. They are now back in the Santa Cruz area and attending Cabrillo College with a plan to apply their experiences to a career in healthcare.



IZABELLA LEÓN | JUDGE

she / her / hers & they / them / their

Awardee, 2025 Queer Youth Leadership Awards | Student, Sacramento State University | Health Justice Fellow, Latino Coalition for a Healthy California (LCHC)

Izabella León is a 2025 Queer Youth Leadership Awardee and Emcee whose admirable involvement and advocacy have improved youth representation in government, mental health and substance abuse resources, and funding for afterschool programs. Now a first-year student at Sacramento State, she resides within the Black Honors College and is majoring in Public Relations and Leadership. Izabella has also earned a Health Justice Fellowship position with the Latino Coalition for a Healthy California, where they've worked to improve policy communications and address health disparities within Latino communities. In addition to her fellowship, Izabella continues to unite youth organizations and local governments, fostering diverse collaborations with individuals from various backgrounds and perspectives.



LAUREN FEIN | JUDGE

she / her / hers

Behavioral Health Director, Santa Cruz County Office of Education (SCCOE)

Lauren Fein is the Behavioral Health Director at the Santa Cruz County Office of Education. With a background as a therapist and a lifelong commitment to supporting young people, she believes deeply in creating spaces where all students — especially queer and marginalized youth — feel seen, safe, and celebrated. Lauren brings a trauma-informed and equity-centered approach to her work, blending clinical expertise with a heart for community building. She is passionate about breaking down barriers to mental health care and helping schools foster environments where every student can thrive. As an ally and advocate, Lauren shows up with compassion, authenticity, and a fierce belief in the power of connection.



MADELINE ALIAH | JUDGE

she / her / hers

Awardee, 2024 Queer Youth Leadership Awards (QYLA) | Student, University of Redlands

Madeline Aliah is a 2024 Queer Youth Leadership Awardee and two-time QYLA Emcee whose public speaking skills and courageous advocacy has greatly contributed to forwarding queer youth visibility, safety, and inclusion. Since coming out as transfem at sixteen, Madeline has actively participated in social justice initiatives, speaking at Cabrillo Watsonville Center's United Against Heat Week, the MAH's Writers of Color event, TEDx's *How to Create a Safe Space*, and most recently, a Hands Off rally. She also wrote and published *This is My Body: Poems by a Teen Transfem*, a collection of poems about her experiences as a transfem woman of color now available on Amazon. Madeline is currently a Sophomore at the University of Redlands, pursuing a hybrid degree in Creative Writing, Ethnic Studies, and Communication.

**THANK YOU TO THE QYLAS,
FOR REMEMBERING
MILO ANIMA**



HE IS LOVED AND MISSED, EVERY MOMENT OF EVERY DAY

MILOWASMEANTFORTHESTAGE.COM

2026-2027 Grants, Scholarships, & Leadership Honorariums to LGBTQIA+ Youth and Clubs

In addition to honoring leadership during the 29th Annual Queer Youth Leadership Awards, we honor and celebrate LGBTQIA+ student campus clubs and individuals who are making Santa Cruz County a safer place. And to those contributing to enriching our communities but who are not listed here, we salute you!

Community Foundation Santa Cruz County Diversity Partnership Fund LGBTQIA+ Club Grants

Community Foundation Santa Cruz County's "Diversity Partnership Fund" is proud to announce the 2026 LGBTQIA+ club grants!

Representatives from 21 clubs applied for and were approved for grants to support activities in the upcoming year. These grants, awarded to Gender and Sexuality Alliances (GSAs), Queer-Straight Alliances (QSAs), Sexuality and Gender Alliances (SAGAs), Rainbow Alliances, and other student pride clubs, are opportunities for LGBTQIA+ clubs to request funding for special projects they proposed. A total of \$7,500 was awarded to 21 clubs in April.

Now in its tenth year, the program has provided many Santa Cruz County LGBTQIA+ student clubs with funding for club activities and projects, examples of which include:

- Hosting inclusive community-building events like: student-led lectures and discussions, book clubs & expansion of LGBTQ+ library, movie nights, arts & craft sessions and markets, school-wide events featuring LGBTQIA+ speakers, fundraisers, collaborating with nonprofits and other clubs;
- Celebrating and/or observing awareness-raising events like: Anti-Bullying Week, Coming Out Day, Harvey Milk Day, Trans Day of Visibility, Trans Day of Remembrance, and Day of (No) Silence;
- Attending educational forums like the LGBTQIA+ Student Summit, Queer studies field trips, and hosting film festivals that create dialogue for queer students and allies;
- Social events like trips to the Boardwalk, queer prom, movie nights, a drag events, and roller-skating nights.

Congratulations to this year's grant recipients:

High Schools:

*Delta Charter High School
Delta Queer-Straight Alliance
Georgiana Bruce Kirby Preparatory
School GSA
Harbor High School QSA
Pacific Collegiate School Queer
Intersectional Alliance
Pajaro Valley High School SAGA
Santa Cruz High School
Rainbow Alliance
Soquel High School QSA
Watsonville Charter School of the
Arts GSA
Watsonville High School GSA*

Middle Schools:

*Aptos Junior High School
Pride Club
Branciforte Middle School
Muskequeers
Cesar Chavez Middle School
Wonder Club
Lakeview Middle School QSA
Mission Hill Middle School Pride
Club
Rolling Hills Middle School D.I.C.E.
San Lorenzo Valley Middle School
GSA
Shoreline Middle School SAGA*

Elementary Schools:

*Gault Elementary School Rainbow
Dolphins
Vine Hill Elementary School
Rainbow Bears
Soquel Elementary School
Rainbow Club*

Community:

*Raíces y Cariño Family Center
PRISM club*

The Diversity Partnership Fund at

S COMMUNITY FOUNDATION
SANTA CRUZ COUNTY
For Good. For Ever. For All.

RECOGNIZING OUR VOLUNTEERS & CORE PRODUCTION TEAM

We thank the community members who donated their time and who supported the project to help make the 2026 Queer Youth Leadership Awards possible:

EMCEES	Oliver Pappazisis Phoenix Blume-Lease
DIRECTOR	Isabella Steigman
CATERING	D'La Colmena Market & Catering
DECORATIONS	Students from Pajaro Valley High School Sexuality and Gender Alliance (SAGA) & Associated Student Body (ASB) Monique Ayala Jonathan Escobar-Enciso Katherine Figueroa Arthur Murray
EVENT FILMING	Watsonville High School Video Academy
EVENT SPANISH TRANSLATOR / INTERPRETER	Kim Guadrón
FINANCE BOOKKEEPING	Neal Savage, Bookkeeper Fiscal Agent, The Diversity Center
FLOWERS	Amy Scott, Ace's Flowers
JUDGING FACILITATORS	Jen Hastings, MD Kathy Cytron, LCSW
OUTREACH COORDINATOR	Melissa Morales
PRODUCTION COORDINATOR	Sophia Garcia
PRODUCERS	Stuart Rosenstein Queer Youth Leadership Awards Core Production Team
PRODUCTION ASSISTANT	Ellis Olivas
PHOTOGRAPHY	Rebecca Stark Photography
PROGRAM BOOKLET PRODUCTION	Maddie Hitzeman
RED CARPET	Dean Maynard
RED CARPET HOST	Mireya "MJ" Reynoso
RESOURCE FAIR	Dean Maynard
SCRIPTWRITER	Sophia Garcia
STAGE MANAGER	Angela Lopes
TECHNICAL PRODUCTION TEAM	Andy Botsford Angela Lenth Lyndsey Gould Sadie Rose Legend Theatrical
VIDEO PRODUCTION	Val Mendoza Students from Watsonville High School Video Academy
VOLUNTEER COORDINATOR	Melissa Morales
WEBSITE	Jordan Iversen, Iversen Design

QYLA is produced by the Queer Youth Task Force of Santa Cruz County.

RECOGNIZING OUR CO-SPONSORS & SUPPORTERS

A HEARTFELT THANK YOU TO:

Ace's Flowers	In Memory of Richard Watson-Riley
Adam Spickler, Trustee, Cabrillo College	Iversen Design
American Civil Liberties Union Santa Cruz County Chapter (ACLU)	James Olivas
Antonia Amore-Broccoli, LCSW	La Selva Beach Community Church
Assemblymember Dawn Addis, CA State Assembly, 30th District	Larry Almonte
Bay Area Municipal Elections Committee (BAYMEC)	Life Lab
Bea Rosenstein	Lori Deal
Big Brothers Big Sisters Santa Cruz County	Milo Anima Legacy Fund
Birds Of A Feather Santa Cruz, Kris Kifer	Nonprofit Connection (NPC) Santa Cruz County
Black China Bakery	Out In Our Faith
Cabrillo College Office of Student Equity	Pajaro Valley Unified School District (PVUSD)
Cabrillo College Rainbow Council	Phillip Gomez & Van Boughner
Capitola-Aptos Rotary Club	Rebecca Stark Photography
Closet Free Radio Show, KZSC	Safe Schools Project
Coffeetopia	San Lorenzo Valley Unified School District (SLVUSD)
Community Foundation of Santa Cruz County	Santa Cruz Area Radical Faeries
Community Printers	Santa Cruz City Schools (SCCS)
County of Santa Cruz	Santa Cruz County Office of Education (SCCOE)
Cruzio	Santa Cruz Pride
Dharma's Restaurant, Bernie Shapiro	Santa Cruz Public Libraries (SCPL)
Dr. Brian Del Core Family Dentistry	Senator John Laird, California State Senate, 17th District
Emerging Jedi Award	Sheri & Richard Watson-Riley
Felipe Hernandez, Supervisor, Fourth District, County of Santa Cruz	Scotts Valley Unified School District (SVUSD)
First 5 Santa Cruz County	Soquel Union Elementary School District (SUESD)
Friends of Jimmy Panetta	Temple Beth El
Friends of Kathy Ruiz Goldenkranz	The Bagelry, John Hamstra
Gail D. Levine	The Diversity Center
Gail Pellerin for Assembly	The Ugly Mug
Health Services Agency (HSA)	TransFamilies of Santa Cruz County
In Memory of Connor Cockerham	Trans Teen Project
In Memory of Milo Anima	Valley Churches United
	Zoe Lofgren for Congress





LGBTQ+ Student Rights, Advocacy and Community



Brought to you by The Diversity Center and The Safe Schools Project of Santa Cruz County

My School, My Rights: Free to Learn, Free to Be

Protecting students' freedom to learn and be themselves at school.



Santa Cruz County Office of Education (SCCOE)

Helpful site for LGBTQ+ students and parents — Supporting LGBTQ+ Students and Families - Santa Cruz County Office Of Education.



The Diversity Center

The Diversity Center's Youth Programs provide safe, affirming spaces for LGBTQ+ youth and allies to connect, express themselves, and build community through social events, GSA/QSA visits, leadership opportunities, and creative workshops.



Support for LGBTQ+ Students and Families from Santa Cruz County Superintendents



The Safe Schools Project of Santa Cruz County

Helpful site for LGBTQ+ Students, Parents, and Educators. Resources include training staff, Curriculum Guides, GSA List, and the annual Rainbow Conference.



Information on California State Laws Protecting LGBTQ+ Students and Staff, as well as relevant resources.





LGBTQ+ Student Rights, Advocacy and Community



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Queer Youth Task Force

The Queer Youth Task Force (QYTF) is comprised of individuals and organizations that work with, or support, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and questioning (LGBTIQ) youth.



Raíces y Cariño

Raíces y Cariño is an equitable, bilingual, inclusive, and safe space for the community to gather and raise their children together. Hosts PRISM, community GSA club for 6th-12th grade students. Located in Watsonville.



TransFamilies of Santa Cruz County

TransFamilies of Santa Cruz County provides information and support for parents and guardians of transgender, nonbinary, and gender expansive children and youth through bi-monthly support group meetings, playgroups, and educational workshops.



Rainbow Connections

The Rainbow Connections Provider Network offers LGBTQ+ affirming services and supports for youth up to age 25 and their families in Monterey County. No-cost online trainings available through Gender Health Training Institute.



Attorney General Bonta: California Schools Will Remain a Welcoming, Inclusive, Safe Place for All

Letter from CA Attorney General Bonta describing rights for LGBTQ+ youth as well as protections and resources in regards to presidential occurrences.



California Department of Education

Instructional guidance, law, and policies for local educational agencies to support LGBTQ+ students.



MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES



NATIONAL SUICIDE PREVENTION LIFELINE

Free and confidential access to crisis counselors 24/7 and 365 days a year.
Call 1-800-273-8255.

MOBILE EMERGENCY RESPONSE TEAM FOR YOUTH (MERTY)

MERTY provides crisis support services to youth 21 and under in Santa Cruz County. The clinical team will come to you and can provide services at safe sites including schools and other community settings, including after-school programs and faith based organizations. To request MERTY services, call 1-800-952-2335 Monday-Friday between 8 a.m.–5 p.m.

NAMI SANTA CRUZ COUNTY HELP LINE

Receive support and access to local resources. Leave a message and receive a call back within 24 hours from a trained volunteer. Call (831) 427-8020.



THE TREVOR PROJECT

The Trevor Project is the leading national organization focused on crisis and suicide prevention efforts among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer & questioning youth. Free and confidential. Call 1-866-488-7386 or Text "Start" to 678-678. You can also chat online and access more mental health resources at thetrevorproject.org



TREVOR LIFELINE

866.488.7386

If you're thinking about suicide,
you deserve immediate help.
Call us anytime 24/7/365.



TREVOR TEXT

Text "Start" to 678-678

Talk to a Trevor counselor via
text message
Monday – Friday 12-7pm PDT.



TREVOR CHAT

TrevorChat.org

Online instant messaging with a
TrevorChat counselor
everyday 12-7pm PDT.



Visit QYLA.org/resources
for additional information

Congratulations to the
Nominees and Awardees of the
2026 Queer Youth Leadership Awards!

*We celebrate your leadership and
service to our community!*



A PROGRAM OF
 **FIRST 5**
SANTA CRUZ COUNTY
triplep.first5scc.org



Congratulations to all the QYLA Nominees & Awardees!



Well-being For All | Bienestar Para Todos

www.schealthcenters.org

Safe Schools Project of Santa Cruz County

a program of the Queer Youth Task Force



What we do

- **Rainbow Conference:**
 - *Queer, Trans, and Allied Student Summit* for middle and high school students
 - *Rainbow Glitter Kids* for elementary school students and their families
 - *Understanding Gender* for parents, guardians, educators, and adult allies.
- Curriculum and school staff trainings on Inclusive Sex Education and LGBTQ+ History
- Santa Cruz, Monterey, and San Benito Counties Comprehensive Sexual Health Education Cohort
- Support for districts and schools to implement the California Healthy Youth Act
- Gender Affirmation Support plans
- Rainbow Tassels Project
- LGBTQ+ Model Schools Program in partnership with Santa Cruz City Schools
- Guidance for school staff on implementing best practices
- Supporting students to understand their rights

Mission Statement

The mission of the Safe Schools Project of Santa Cruz County is to partner with youth, schools, and school districts to create and maintain safe, inclusive, and affirming schools for all LGBTQIA2S+ students, staff, and allies.

The Safe Schools Project of Santa Cruz County (SSP) works in collaboration with local schools and local and state-wide community organizations to provide support, professional development and learning, and resources for school administrators, teachers, counselors and support staff to ensure LGBTQIA2S+ youth feel safe at school and their rights are respected.

Who we are

OUR TEAM

Jamie A. Cutter, M.Ed., she/her, *Executive Director*

Jen Salinas-Holz, she/her/ella

Zak Keith, they/them

Tyra Williams, she/her

Sarananda S. Osheim, she/her

Stuart Rosenstein, he/him

Contact

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